

# INFERNO!



ISSUE 43 • £5 UK • \$6.95 US

Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

# INFERNO!

**F**OLLOWING ON from the previous Gaunt's Ghosts and Gotrek & Felix Inferno! specials, next issue will be an Ultramarines Fourth Company special starring Captain Uriel Ventris. In a way it's a homecoming for the good captain as it was only three short years ago that he made his debut in these pages. As with all the best Inferno! characters, he soon went on to spawn his own novel series, the third of which, *Dead Sky, Black Sun*, is published this October.

The tales in the next issue lead directly into that third novel and will see Uriel Ventris heading off in a bold new direction. The events of *Warriors of Ultramar* have had lasting repercussions and in *Consequences*, Uriel has to pay a heavy price for the decisions he made. *The Enemy of my Enemy* on the other hand, introduces several key personalities from *Dead Sky, Black Sun* and sees the return of characters you might not have expected to see again. In addition, there will be a complete illustrated history of the Ultramarines

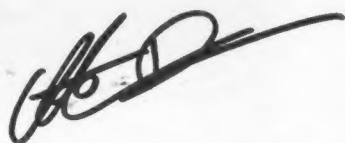
Fourth Company and an awesome comic strip, *Black Bone Road*, focusing on one of Uriel's early adventures before he was promoted to the rank of captain.

All of the above has been written by Graham McNeill who also reveals a few titbits about the future of Uriel Ventris and the Fourth Company, as well as the Warhammer 40,000 universe in general, in an exclusive interview.

**S**O WHO'S NEXT for the Inferno! special treatment? Matthias Thullman of *Witch Hunter* fame is another character who debuted in Inferno! and with further novels planned would make an ideal candidate. Ben Counter's *Soul Drinker* novels have proved to be exceptionally popular and although Ben himself is an Inferno! regular, the chapter he's crafted have yet to grace these pages. The prolific Sandy Mitchell's Ciaphas Cain has already appeared in four Inferno! short stories as well as two novels and has certainly got people talking on the Black Library forums. What

about Kage? Ragnar Blackmane?

As ever, we want to know what you think about this and have a hand in shaping the future of Inferno!



Christian Dunn  
Editor



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# CONTENTS

## **A BLACK LIBRARY™ PUBLICATION**

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*Rik Cooper*

### **INVALUABLE HELP**

*Dan Ebeck*

*Chris Jones*

### **COVER**

*Lizardmen by*

*Dave Allsop*

## **4 The Seventh Boon**

Everyone knows that making a deal with a daemon is a dangerous business, but then the ingenuity and greed of men is almost measureless. A man can ask the question: how can I cheat a daemon? Given enough time, he may come up with an answer.

*Story Mitchel Scanlon • Illustration Jeff Wayne*

## **18 Relics**

*A Doom Eagles Story.* A squad of young Doom Eagle novices are being put through vigorous training exercises on the barren desert planet of Serek. Some are finding the tasks set them hard to overcome, but when danger arrives from under the sand, training turns into real combat.

*Story James Swallow • Illustration Shaun Thomas*

## **33 The Bad, the Warped & the Insane**

When the call goes out for the mutant population of Araki to align themselves under the banner of their respective Chaos champions only the baddest, the most warped and the insane need apply!

*Script Stu Taylor • Art Mike Collins*

## **39 The Cuckoo of Hammerbilt**

A wounded stranger appears in the quiet village of Hammerbilt. His intentions seem honourable, and the townsfolk are soon smitten. But Tobias of the militia is less than enamoured when the stranger makes advances upon the woman he loves.

*Story James Peaty*

## **52 To Guard the Dead**

When the Lord Brecker is seen falling to his doom from a high tower, the whole town is ripe with gossip. Two brigands, Walther and Kurt, are employed to guard the mansion grounds and Brecker's young widow. But when a fanatical witch hunter appears, it is proved that nothing is as what seems.

*Story Brian Maycock • Illustration Andrew Hepworth*

INFERNO! issue #43; July/August 2004.

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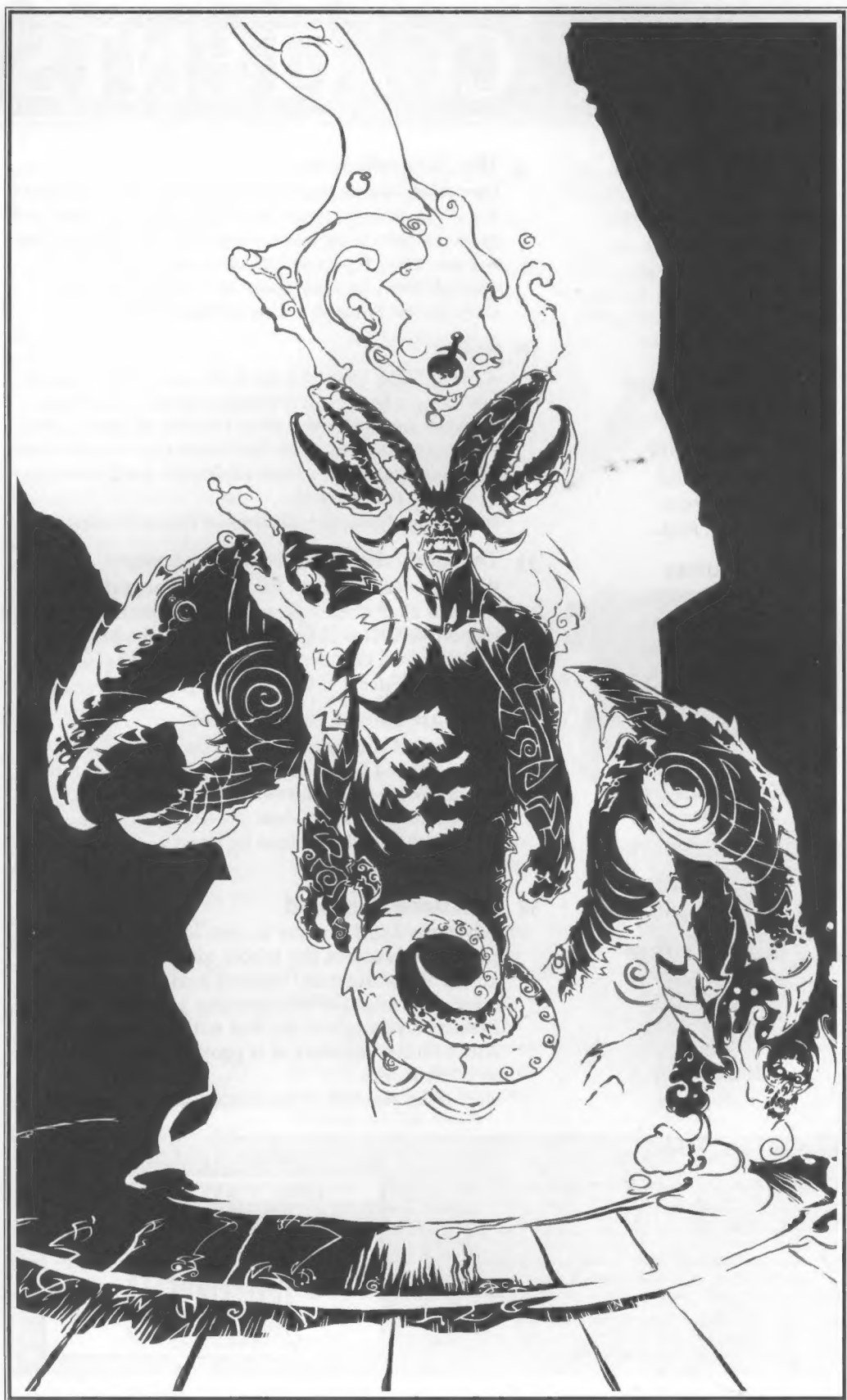
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GW Product Code: 60719999059

ISBN 1-84416-038-6



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# The Seventh Boon

Mitchel Scanlon

IT WAS LATE and, given the hour, the draughty expanse of the orphanage's dining hall seemed hardly warmer than the wintry night outside. Yet despite having been roused blearily from their beds, a dozen barefoot children filed across the cold flagstone floor without complaint. Quiet and dutiful, they came to where Sister Altruda stood with the visitors and formed a line facing them, heads up and spines held straight like diminutive soldiers summoned to a parade ground muster. Then, seeing one of the visitors step forward to inspect them, twelve small faces grew bright with sudden hope – only for those hopes to be abruptly dashed as, finishing her inspection, the young woman turned to Sister Altruda to deliver a terse and crushing verdict.

'No,' Frau Forst said, 'none of these will do.'

As one, twelve faces fell. Watching it, Sister Altruda felt a familiar sadness to see twelve childish hearts hardened a little more against hope by the pain of rejection. It could not be helped. As priestess to the goddess of mercy, Sister Altruda's own heart went out to them. But, as director of the Orphanage of Our Lady Shallya of the Blessed Heart, she was a realist. Marienburg manufactured so many unwanted children and if she could find even one a new home tonight it would be a triumph. Though, given that her visitors had spent the better part of an hour viewing dozens of children now without finding one to please them, presently even that small victory seemed beyond her.

Sighing inwardly, Sister Altruda beckoned to the novitiate Saskia to lead the children from the room. Then, summoning

her most diplomatic tone, she turned to her visitors once more.

'You must understand,' she said, 'there are hundreds of children here. Perhaps if we were to discuss more fully your criteria in choosing the child you wish to adopt, we might speed the selection.'

'Criteria?' Frau Forst replied, as though vaguely bewildered by the term. 'There are no criteria, sister. It is simply a matter of finding a child my husband and I can love as our own. A child we can share our lives with. We will know him when we see him. Isn't that right, Gunther?'

Behind her, Herr Forst gave a single silent nod. They made a strange couple. Frau Forst seemed no more than twenty-odd years of age: a vivacious butterfly of a girl shrouded in colourful silks and velvet furs. A woman whose prettiness, to Sister Altruda's eyes, was only slightly marred by an over-enthusiastic application of rouge to her lips. In contrast, her husband looked more than twenty years her senior. Trim and well-preserved perhaps, with broad shoulders and none of the heaviness of waist common to men of his years and position. But his dark hair and well-groomed beard were flecked with streaks of grey, while his shrewd, quiet eyes spoke of a man who had seen enough of life to always be wary.

A moth to his wife's butterfly, Herr Forst dressed in sombre greys and blacks, his only ornament an amulet on a heavy gold chain around his neck announcing his membership in one of Marienburg's innumerable mercantile orders. Given their disparities, Sister Altruda could not help but suspect that Frau Forst had come here on a whim, intent on choosing herself a trophy child in the same manner as her husband

had evidently chosen himself a trophy wife. Still, it was none of her concern. Whatever their motives, she did not doubt that any child would be happier living with the Forsts than in the dreary and overcrowded confines of the orphanage. And besides, the good character of Herr Forst himself was beyond question.

Where others who might consider themselves among the 'great-and-good' of Marienburg seemed content to let the city's flotsam children be condemned to the streets, over the last five years Gunther Forst had been the orphanage's single most generous private benefactor. He had his eccentricities though and if after five years of distant benevolence he had come to adopt a child outside the orphanage's usual hours of business then so be it. Sister Altruda would no more reject a reasonable request from Herr Forst than she would the High Priestess in Couronne. No matter how difficult Frau Forst was to please, no matter how nebulous her requirements or exacting her standards, her position as the wife of Gunther Forst placed her beyond reproach. If need be, Sister Altruda would rouse every child in the orphanage and spend the next six hours trooping them past Frau Forst until she found one that pleased her.

Though, given how late it was already, she sincerely hoped it would not come to that.

Hearing the door open once more, Sister Altruda turned to see Saskia leading another group of a dozen children into the room. Lining up as the others had before them, the children waited patiently as Frau Forst stepped forward to examine them. This time though, instead of glancing briefly over the line, Frau Forst paused two-thirds of the way along to gaze down at a sandy-haired boy of about eight whose features seemed almost angelic in their perfection. Guilelessly, the boy lifted his own eyes to stare back and for long moments the woman and the child stood there with eyes locked as though entranced – only for the spell to be broken as, abruptly, Herr Forst cleared his throat. Hearing it, Frau Forst turned to look at her husband for a moment, before turning back to the silent boy before her.

'And what is your name, my little prince?' she cooed at him.

'The boy does not speak,' Sister Altruda said.

'He is mute, then?' Frau Forst asked, raising a quizzical eyebrow towards her.

'No. We examined him when he was brought here and could find no sign of any physical defect. It may be that some shock has caused him to temporarily lose the ability to speak. It is difficult to say. He was found wandering the streets some days ago and we know nothing of his background. Given time, we can only hope his voice returns to him.'

'I see,' Frau Forst said, turning to coo at the boy once more. 'If you ask me, my little prince, all you need is a nice loving home. A warm, safe place with toys and dogs and all the things a boy could want. Why, once you come home with us, I'm sure we'll have you talking ten-to-the-dozen in no time.'

With that, Frau Forst held out her hand, smiling in delight as she saw the boy raise his own hand to meet it. It seemed, finally, she had made her choice. And, privately, Sister Altruda found herself forced to admit the search had been worth it. There was indeed something different about this one. There was something about his eyes, a sense of pure and untarnished innocence. If that was what Frau Forst had been looking for all this time, no wonder it had taken her so long to find it.

It was rare, after all, to find much that was innocent on the streets of Marienburg.



**A**FTERWARDS, sitting within the shuttered comfort of his coach as it sped away from the orphanage into the night, Gunther Forst allowed himself the luxury of a small moment of satisfaction. It had gone better than he could ever have dared hope. The efforts he had invested over the last several years –

all the donations, the grand and charitable gestures – had finally paid a handsome dividend. There had been no resistance, no awkward questions; the priestess and her novitiate had given him the boy gladly. And though he might have only a few scant hours left in which to put the rest of his plan in motion, if it proceeded half as smoothly as matters had at the orphanage he should achieve his wider aims with ease.

‘My, but you’re a quiet one aren’t you, boy? I don’t know, we save you from that nasty orphanage and not even a word of thanks. What’s the matter, my little prince? Cat got your tongue?’

It was the woman. His erstwhile ‘wife’. Evidently bored, she produced a small golden heart on a string of teardrop-shaped garnet beads from within her glove and began to dangle it in front of the face of the silent boy beside her, teasing him.

‘Surely you can tell us your name at least,’ she cooed. ‘Every boy has a name. Tell me yours and perhaps I will give you this pretty thing as a gift. You would like that, wouldn’t you?’

Looking at the ruby light jumping from the dancing beads, the boy said nothing. Grimly, Gunther recognised them as the same set of Shallyan prayer beads he had seen on Sister Altruda’s wrist earlier. It seemed the dubious talents of the woman opposite him went beyond the obvious. Though it had seemed a masterstroke when he had conceived the idea of hiring a courtesan to accompany him to the orphanage and play the part of his wife now he was beginning to find her tiresome. Granted, she had lent a veneer of legitimacy to his attempts to adopt the child, but now the woman had served her purpose, her presence here was at best an irrelevance, at worst an irritation.

‘Leave the boy alone,’ he told her.

Pausing, the woman turned to look at him as though trying to read the limits of his patience in the lines of his face. Then, turning back to the boy once more, she began again in the same idiot tone.

‘Did you hear that, little prince?’ she purred. ‘Poppa sounds cross. Do you think he is angry because you won’t tell us your name?’

‘Far from it,’ Gunther said, enough of an edge to his voice to let her know she was trying his temper. ‘I have long counted silence as a virtue, in both children and harlots alike.’

At that, the woman fell quiet. Crossing her arms, she turned to face the lowered shade of the coach window with her mouth set in a sulky line. But if the boy felt any gratitude towards Gunther for his intervention, he gave no sign of it. Instead, seemingly interested in nothing in particular, he continued to sit in wide-eyed silence. Looking at him, Gunther found himself struck once more by the child’s manner. The boy seemed possessed of a flawless, almost otherworldly aura of innocence. Seeing it, Gunther felt a rising feeling of hope. The vital task of finding someone possessed of a perfect and utter purity had always seemed the hardest part of his plan.

Now he had the boy, the rest should fall into place.

The coach lurched to a halt. Hearing the coach roof above him creak as the driver left his seat, Gunther waited for the door to be opened. But when it was, instead of the coachman he saw a dark figure appear in the open doorway with a black kerchief tied around the lower half of his face, though of more immediate concern was the loaded handbow the man aimed at Gunther’s heart.

‘My apologies for the inconvenience, mein herr,’ the interloper said. ‘But I would count it a personal favour if you and the boy would step down from your compartment. Oh, and you will be careful to keep your hands where I can see them, won’t you? I would hate for either of you to have to suffer a misfortune.’

Doing as he was told, careful to keep himself between the handbow and the boy, Gunther stepped down from the coach with the boy behind him. Once outside, he saw the coach had stopped in a refuse-strewn alleyway the uncobbled surface of which declared it to be among one of the city’s more isolated and disreputable thoroughfares. A second kerchief-masked footpad stood behind the first, a short wooden cudgel in his hands, while to their side the coachman lurked nervously beside his horses. Seeing the coachman unharmed and



apparently unguarded, Gunther realised at once that he was part of it. Just as he realised, outnumbered three-to-one and with the added distraction of having to protect the boy, he would have to weigh his options carefully.

Having long feared the twin evils of disease and violent death, Gunther had devoted no small number of years to learning the skills necessary to defend against the latter. He was an excellent shot, and hidden out of sight beneath his cloak were a pair of duelling pistols purchased some years past from the grieving widow of hot-headed nobleman whose passion for honour had been exceeded only by the incompetence of his marksmanship. But for all the finely-crafted elegance and accuracy, the pistols were loud and clumsy weapons. And, even in this isolated spot, the sound of shots might serve to draw the attention of the Watch.

It would have to be the knife.

'Here,' he said, lifting the chain from around his neck, 'I will give you anything you want so long as you let the boy and I go in peace.'

'A most commendable attitude,' the handbowman said. 'Really, mein herr, your clear-sighted grasp of the situation does you credit.'

'Not at all,' Gunther replied, holding the chain out in his right hand and watching as the man took two steps towards it. 'I am simply a pragmatist. All the same, I must confess to some surprise. I would have thought a handbow far too expensive a weapon for the purse of a pimp.'

Abruptly, the advancing figure stopped, his eyes above his mask grown suddenly hard and tight.

'He knows, Ruprecht,' the one with the cudgel said, breaking the ugly silence. 'He knows who you are.'

'Well, if he didn't before, Oskar, he certainly does now,' the other replied, pulling his mask down to reveal a sallow yet handsome face. As Gunther suspected, it was the woman's pimp. 'Bravo, Herr Forst. You are right about the handbow, of course. It came into my possession in the wake of a financial dispute with one of Greta's gentleman clients. But, tell me, how did you know it was me?'

'You let the woman stay in the coach,' Gunther said. 'No matter the tales of the gallantry of highwaymen, it seemed unlikely you would leave her possessions unmolested unless they were effectively yours already. That alone was enough to make it clear you were her pimp come to rob me.'

'I am afraid you overrate your value to us, Herr Forst,' the pimp sneered. 'Robbing you was never anything more than an afterthought. It is the child we want. To the right buyer, a boy like that is a valuable piece of merchandise. And, I assure you, I make it my business to know all the right buyers.'

'Now,' the pimp said, taking a step forward as he raised his handbow to fire, 'seeing as you have been so helpful as to make us aware you know who we are, it would seem foolish to leave you alive to tell of it.'

With a sudden twist of his wrist, Gunther threw the amulet at the pimp, the chain hit the man in the face just as his finger tightened on the trigger. As the bolt flew wild over his shoulder, Gunther stepped forward, pulling his knife from its hidden sheath with his left hand and thrusting it deep into Ruprecht's side. Eyes startled with pain, the pimp tried to scream, the sound emerged as a wet gurgle as, dying, his body pitched forward towards the ground. But Gunther was past him already. Seeing the other footpad lift his cudgel and charge forward to attack, Gunther tossed the knife from left hand to right with a fluid motion, raising his left arm to block the descending wrist holding the cudgel while, with his right, he slid the knife between the man's ribs and into his heart.

Pulling the knife free as the second man collapsed, Gunther turned to see the coachman still standing beside his horses. Holding the butt of his coachwhip before him as an improvised weapon, the coachman seemed glued to the spot, caught between the urge to attack and the fear Gunther would dispose of him as easily as the others.

'All I want is to go in peace with the boy,' Gunther told him. 'And I want the coach. Run now, and I will let you live.'



For a moment, the coachman stood staring in disbelief. Then, the prospect of escape overcoming his distrust, he turned and ran. Only for Gunther to throw his knife the instant the man turned his back, taking the coachman high in the neck and dropping him before he had gone three steps.

Striding forward to pull his knife from the dead man's neck, Gunther's first thoughts were for the safety of the boy. Turning to look behind him, he was relieved to see the still strangely silent child standing, uninjured, beside the coach where he had left him.

'Get into the coach, boy,' Gunther said, stooping to pull his knife free. 'We are leaving.'

Instead of moving, the boy turned his wide eyes to stare at something on the coach, before looking back at Gunther once more. Noticing for the first time a slumped figure hanging halfway through the window of the coach door, Gunther stepped forward to investigate and saw something which soon had him silently cursing his luck.

It was the woman. She was dead: the flight of her pimp's errant bolt jutting from a wound in her neck. Evidently she had been standing watching the confrontation through the window when it struck her. But what concerned Gunther more was the woman's blood. It was everywhere, staining the side of the coach and the running board beneath it. The coach was next to useless to him now. He could not afford the chance some over-eager watchman would see the blood and be moved to ask questions Gunther would rather not answer. Nor could he simply clean the blood away – even had a suitable supply of water been at hand, it would take too long. And tonight, more so than at any other point in Gunther's life, time was of the essence.

His decision made, Gunther opened the coach door, stepping to one side to let the woman's body fall past him. Being careful not to get any more blood on his clothes, he retrieved his belongings from inside the coach before stepping outside once more to take one of the night-lanterns hanging from the coach's side and fashion a makeshift carrying handle for it from a

piece of cloth. Ready at last, he turned to the boy. For better or worse, if they were to reach their destination in good time tonight, they would have to walk.

Or one of them would at least.

'Get onto my shoulders, boy,' Gunther said. 'We are going to play piggy-on-my-back.'

Silently, the boy did as he was told. Getting to his feet with the boy clinging to his shoulders, Gunther started on a brisk walk headed southwards. At best estimation they were at least a mile and a half from their destination. He would have to walk fast: the confrontation with the pimp and the others had cost him too much time already. No matter what else happened tonight, all his preparations needed to be ready by midnight.

If not, there would be hell to pay.



**H**E WAS sweating by the time he got to the docks. And when he reached the outside of the burnt-out tavern in an alleyway just off a deserted wharf, the weight of the boy on his shoulders seemed to have grown so much it was as though he had an adult perched upon his back. Relieved to have arrived at his destination at last, Gunther sank down to his knees to let the boy climb off. Then, rising to his feet and pleased to see no sign of life anywhere along the alley, he made his way toward the tavern with the boy behind him.

It had a history, this place. In its heyday the Six Crowns had been the nexus for much that was illicit and illegal in Marienburg; a place where deals could be struck and bargains made with no questions asked. Most recently, it had served as de facto headquarters for the Vanderhecht Organisation, a ruthless gang of smugglers whose leader had lived a double life as one of the most respected merchants in the city. But Hugo Vanderhecht was dead, killed by a bounty

hunter after fleeing to the marshes, while the Six Crowns had been gutted a year ago in an unexplained fire, rumoured to have been set by the gang's second-in-command in an attempt to hide his identity from the Watch. Still, it hardly mattered to Gunther who had set the fire. Whoever had done it, he owed them a debt of thanks. His work tonight needed privacy, and the derelict, ramshackle building before him would suit his purpose admirably.

Besides, he had his own history with this place. Years ago, it had served as the backdrop to an event which had changed the course of his life. And now that life had come full circle and brought him to the Six Crowns once more.

Advancing towards the fire-blackened doorway, Gunther found himself briefly troubled by thoughts of his own mortality. Something of the tavern's current state, the crumbling plaster of its walls and the gaping heat-warped windows, brought to mind unpleasant echoes. For a moment he felt the weight of every one of his years bearing down upon him, greater even than the weight of the silent boy who now walked beside him. Perhaps it was nostalgia, or the last spasms of conscience of the man he had once been, but he suddenly felt a sadness he had not known in years. Then, shaking his head to clear it, he put sentiment behind him and pushed the door aside to enter the tavern.

'Come on, boy,' Gunther said, seeing the child hanging back at the threshold. 'There is nothing here to harm you.'

Once past its deceptively ruined outer shell, the tavern's interior was surprisingly intact. Picking carefully through a hallway choked with fallen timbers and ash-strewn debris, Gunther made his way towards what had once been the smaller of the inn's two public bar rooms. Then, checking to see the boy was still behind him, he stepped inside the room, lifting his lantern to inspect the surroundings.

It was exactly as he left it. Thanks to several hours' worth of heavy labour when he had visited the tavern earlier in the evening, Gunther had cleared the floor of the bar room of its dust and detritus. Happy to see no sign of the room having been disturbed since, Gunther crossed the floor to the ruined bar. Then, stepping

behind it, he stooped to pull away some of the fractured casks beneath, revealing the shape of the small wooden chest he had hidden there earlier. Relieved to see it undamaged and its lock intact, he lifted it onto the bar. As he took the key from the thong around his neck, Gunther noticed the boy leaning on the bar, craning his neck expectantly to watch the chest being opened. Pausing, Gunther put his hand inside his cloak to retrieve one of the small cloth purses hanging from his belt before, pulling open the drawstring, he took a bag of waxed paper from within it.

'Here, boy,' he said, giving it to the child. 'Inside there are dried apricots and sugared almonds. You may have as many as you want, so long as you sit in the corner there and keep quiet.'

Accepting the offering, the boy jumped down from the bar, hastening to sit cross-legged in a distant corner and begin eating the sweets. For a moment Gunther watched him. Then, satisfied the boy was occupied, he twisted the key in the lock and opened the chest, checking a mental inventory as he arranged the contents on the bar beside him. It was all here: brazier, mortar, pestle, verbena leaves, mandrake root, man-tallow candles, wyrdstone fragments, vials of beastman urine and two dozen other things besides. Coming to the bottom of the chest, Gunther lifted out a long object wrapped in cloth, before pulling the edges of the cloth aside to reveal the bladed iron tube of the trocar. Staring at the thumb's-width notch set halfway along its length, his hand strayed unconsciously to the small, round object nestling safely within a hidden pocket inside his vest. For a moment he cupped it in his hand, feeling the comfortable weight and hardness of it through the cloth. He had everything he needed. Now, it was simply a matter of putting his plan in motion.

Opening a jar containing the crushed fingerbones of a martyred Sigmarite saint, Gunther put them in the bowl of the mortar, adding a quantity of chalk and powdered dragon tooth before grinding it together with the pestle. Then, being careful to leave no gaps, he used the mixture to draw a circle of binding on the floor around the bar. To give the circle

power he would have to chant the warding spell. But that would come later. He must see to the tripwires first, then draw a pentagram within the binding circle, centred on the bar. After that, there were candles to be lit, incenses to be burned, an altar to be arranged. A dozen different tasks awaited him before he could begin the ritual, and a single moment's carelessness in any of them would spell disaster. But he was confident, all the same. He had prepared for this night's work for decades. Years spent carefully considering all that might go amiss, shaping and reshaping his design, planning everything down to the smallest detail. But he had needed to; the stakes were high. So high, not one man in ten thousand times ten thousand would have ever dared risk what he would tonight. But no matter the risks, no matter the dangers, the prize would be worth it. Come what may, tonight he would play a devil's gambit.

And he would play to win.



**D**IMLY, THROUGH the walls of the tavern, Gunther heard a bell tolling in the distance. The harbourmaster was calling time. Ten bells. Two hours to midnight. He would have to work fast. As he hurried to the contents of the chest once more to resume his preparations, Gunther was struck by the irony of it. The course of the life he had set upon in the backroom of the Six Crowns when Marienburg was still part of the Empire would be decided in the selfsame tavern in two hours time. Despite all the groundwork and the decades of planning, all his life came down to in the end was a mere two hours. No, not even that. Like all men, ultimately the course of his life would be decided in a single moment – a moment for him that would come when the bell tolled midnight. But he could hardly complain. Where most men

stumbled blindly towards the defining instants of their lives, he had been forewarned of his decades ago. It was not as though the moment had caught him unawares; he had been gifted with many years in which to make ready. Years more than three times past the normal span of man.

Exactly one hundred and fifty years, to be precise.



**I**T WAS busy in the *Six Crowns* that night and, as he edged his way through a crowd of hard-faced men towards the bar, it came as no surprise to Gunther to see that the tavern's reputation as a den of thieves and cutthroats seemed well-deserved. He saw men who wore the scars of branding, others with clipped ears or penal tattoos, even a man with a rope scar around his neck. More than half the men there had been marked in one way or another by the city fathers' justice. Though, to Gunther's mind, that was all to the good. His business here tonight was a private matter. And, whatever their other vices, criminals at least could usually be relied upon to keep themselves to themselves.

Coming to the bar at last, Gunther signalled to the barman, dropping a guilder on the counter by way of enticement.

'Can I help you, mein herr?' the barman asked, lifting the coin to his mouth to test it with his teeth.

'I am here to meet someone,' Gunther told him. 'In the backroom. It has all been arranged.'

Saying nothing, the barman looked Gunther up and down with ill-disguised suspicion. Then, right hand wandering beneath the bar before him, he spoke once more.

'You were given a token?' he asked, eyes dark with distrust.



Fumbling in his vest, Gunther produced another coin, a six-sided silver one that had been delivered to his house by messenger three days earlier, and handed it to the barman. Rather than bite this one, the barman stood studying it in his hand, looking first at the embossed motif of a serpent coiled around a piece of fruit on one side, before turning it over to see Six Crowns arranged in a circle on the reverse.

'Six crowns, mein herr,' the barman said, offering a hard, humourless smile as he handed the coin back to him. 'Quite a coincidence, don't you think?'

Lifting the hinged flap at the end of the counter, the barman nodded for Gunther to step behind the bar. Then, leading him through a curtained doorway, he ushered him into a hallway stacked on either side with empty beer casks and crates of bottles, before pointing towards a door at its end.

'The backroom is down there, mein herr,' the barman said. 'No need to knock. You are expected.'

With that, he was gone, stepping back behind the curtain towards the bar and his patrons. Alone now, Gunther found himself strangely paralysed by the weight of his own expectations. He could hardly believe it could be so simple. Where he had expected blood sacrifice or elaborate rituals, there was only a short walk down an ordinary corridor towards a perfectly nondescript door. A door through which, he hoped, lay the answer to an ambition he had pursued for more than twenty years.

Summoning his will at last, Gunther advanced down the corridor and lifted his hand to the doorknob. Doing his best to keep it from shaking, he pushed the door open.

'You must be Gunther,' a smoothly spoken voice said from within the room. 'Please, come in. I assure you, there is nothing here to harm you.'

Stepping inside the dingy backroom, Gunther found his expectations confounded for the second time in as many minutes. Ahead of him at a table at the centre of the room sat a blond-haired man in the clothes of a gentleman, a sardonic smile twitching at the corner of his lips as he raised a wineglass in languid greeting.

'You were expecting horns, perhaps?' the figure said as though reading his thoughts. 'Cloven hooves? A barbed tail, even? I hope you are not disappointed. Given the unfortunate tendency of mortals to soil themselves when confronted with my true form, I thought it better to dress down for our meeting. Frankly, the floor of this room seemed filthy enough already.'

The smile on his lips grew even broader. Stunned, his mind reeling, Gunther gawped at him for a moment, before stammering a reply.

'You are the Silver Tongue, Daemon Prince and First among the Infernal Legions of the god Slaanesh?' he said, voice cracking as he said the last word aloud.

'Generally, I prefer the name Samael,' the other purred. 'But really, Gunther, you know all this already. Otherwise you would never have come here to meet me.'

'You know my name?' Gunther asked, regretting how foolish the question made him sound the second it left his lips.

'Of course I do, Gunther,' Samael replied, sliding an opened bottle of wine and spare wineglass across the table towards him. 'When a man comes to bargain with me, I make it a point to learn all I can of him. But we can discuss that later. First though, I suggest you take a chair and try to regather your wits. Oh, and help yourself to the wine. Whatever its other faults, this tavern possesses a surprisingly inoffensive cellar.'

Sitting down warily to face the daemon, Gunther picked up the bottle, only to pause halfway through filling his glass at the thought of a sudden, fearful premonition.

'You may drink freely, my friend,' the daemon said, seeming to read his thoughts again. 'Even if I had the slightest intention of killing you tonight, I need hardly resort to anything so tiresome as poison.'

Feeling vaguely embarrassed, Gunther finished filling the glass, then took a healthy draught of what soon proved to be an agreeable, if not quite vintage, red Bordeleaux. Despite his best efforts to hide it, he was sure his nervousness was entirely obvious to the creature before him. Just as it was similarly obvious to him that the daemon's pleasant appearance – the

easy charm, handsome good looks and fashionable frills and ribbons of his clothing – were no more than a mask. No matter how convivial his host, Gunther did not for a minute doubt that he was in presence of an ancient evil. With that thought there came a rising tide of barely suppressed panic as suddenly he was struck by the sheer enormity of what he had come here to do tonight. But this was no time for second thoughts. For better or worse, he had set himself on this course willingly. And even here, in the face of damnation, he would not waver.

‘Now, where were we?’ the daemon mused, apparently convinced Gunther had settled himself enough to begin their business. ‘Ah yes. I was commenting on how well I know you. And I do know you, Gunther, better than anyone else in the world, I’d wager. For example, unlike your mercantile peers, I know you have spent the last twenty years of your life obtaining and studying a wide variety of magical, alchemical and heretical texts. You have read the works of Van Hal, von Juntz, Krischan Donn, Ralfs, even the tedious prose of the Ratmen-obsessed Leiber. And all of it with the aim of achieving a single burning ambition. But it was only recently, after a visit to Marienburg’s Unseen Library to read Hollseher’s *Liber Malefic*, that you finally discovered a means by which to achieve your aim. Now, you have come here to me in the hope that I can give you what your books could not. Well, happily, I can help you, Gunther. But there are rules in these matters. And, if you want me to grant your wish, you must first speak the words of it aloud.’

It was true, all of it. But, before he moved his mouth to frame the words, Gunther reminded himself he must be wary. It went without saying that the daemon would try to trick him. But in the end, the selling of a man’s soul was a business matter like any other. If he was to get what he wanted in return, Gunther must simply be careful when it came to negotiating the contract.

‘I want you to make it so that I will not age and will live forever,’ Gunther said.

For a moment, the daemon stared at him in amusement, the smile at the corner of his lips growing several notches wider. In the days leading up to the meeting

Gunther had practised this scene in his mind many times, but despite all those rehearsals he had never expected to hear the answer Samael gave him now.

‘No,’ the daemon said with a smile.

Gunther sat open-mouthed, gaping at the smug daemon in disbelief. He had come to sell his soul – how could Samael refuse him?

‘You must try and see it from my point of view, Gunther,’ Samael said, fingers pressed together in a curiously human gesture. ‘What use is it, after all, for a daemon to be pledged the soul of a man who is going to live forever? How would I ever collect the debt? No, I am sorry, my friend, but I am afraid I must reject your proposal.’

Stunned, Gunther sat in uneasy and despairing silence. Twenty years, he thought. Twenty years, and I am no closer to my objective.

‘Of course, I do have a counter-proposal,’ the daemon said mildly, as though unaware of the effect his words had on Gunther’s desperate heart. ‘Absolute immortality may be out of the question. But there seems no reason I couldn’t keep you from aging and grant you longevity enough to extend your life beyond the normal span of man. And in return all I ask for – aside from your soul, of course – is that you perform a limited number of tasks on my behalf. Shall we say seven? Give me seven boons, Gunther, and I will give you a part of your wish at least.’

‘Seven boons?’ Gunther said, still barely able to comprehend how quickly his horizons had been diminished. ‘And who is to decide what the nature of these boons will be?’

‘I will,’ the daemon replied. ‘I promise you they will all be well within the scope of your abilities. Nor would I insult your intelligence by demanding that you give me all seven boons at once. You need only perform one boon now and I will stop you from aging and guarantee you another twenty years of life. Then, when those twenty years are done, you will perform a second boon in return for another twenty years, and so on, until all the boons are done. Think of it, Gunther, perform all seven boons and you can have another one hundred and forty years of life without

aging a single day. Naturally, our agreement would not extend to protecting you from disease or violent death – even my powers are not limitless in that regard. But really, I think I am being fair enough already. As I'm sure you'll agree, one-hundred-and-forty years is a long time for a daemon to wait to claim his due.'

Letting his words hang in the air a moment, the daemon sipped his wine as Gunther wrestled with a thousand silent thoughts and fears. Then, seeing Gunther's discomfort, the daemon leaned forward once more with the smile of a huntsman who knows his trap is sprung.

'Of course,' he said, 'if you do not like the terms of my offer, you can always say no.'



**H** E HAD SAID yes, of course. Granted, he had bargained for better terms, ultimately persuading Samael to extend the period of guaranteed longevity between each boon to twenty-five years. But, beyond that small concession, he had had little choice but to accept the daemon's terms. In the end, the daemon Samael had every cause to be smug; his was the only bargain on the table.

Now, as he hurried to complete the preparations for his ritual in the shell of the ruined inn where he had met Samael all those years ago, Gunther found his thoughts turning towards the six boons he had completed on the daemon's behalf already. Some had been relatively straightforward: arranging the disgrace and murder of a high-ranking nobleman, or the theft of a holy relic – a cup – from the Temple of Sigmar the Merciful in Stirland. Others had been both more complicated and time-consuming. Take the six years he had spent working as a humble lay gardener in the grounds of a temple of Shallya in Ostermark, corrupting the priestesses and their novitiates one-by-one until he had turned them all to the worship of Slaanesh. He could still remember the

look of outrage on the mother superior's face turning to delight when she had finally yielded. And, while Samael's motives in requesting some of the boons had been obvious at once, others had been more obscure, only becoming clearer with time. Take the sixth boon for example, when he had been called upon to ensure the progression of a young Sigmarite cleric called Johann Esmer. But, no matter how strange or onerous the tasks he had been called upon to perform, he had completed them regardless. And with each completed boon Samael had kept his own side of their bargain: Gunther had not aged a day in one-hundred-and-fifty years.

Tonight though, the seventh boon was due.

Two days earlier, a messenger had arrived bearing Samael's instructions to meet him here in the Six Crowns at midnight. But, for all the successes of their arrangement thus far, Gunther was not so foolish a man as to trust a daemon to his word. He had always known Samael would try to cheat him. And Gunther had seen the loophole in their bargain a century and a half earlier when Samael told him he would not be protected against disease or violent death. Once the seventh boon was done and his value was at an end, Gunther fully expected the daemon to kill him. Why should Samael be willing to wait another twenty-five years for his soul after all, when it was within his power to kill him and take it at once? There could be no doubt, the daemon was going to try and cheat him.

Unless, of course, Gunther cheated the daemon first.

From the very beginning he had been playing his own double game, only agreeing to Samael's terms to give him the time he needed to find a method by which to cheat the daemon of his due so that he might live forever. And now, after one hundred and fifty years of planning and preparation, the final movements of that game were almost upon him. The pieces were all in place. Soon, Gunther would play his devil's gambit.

There was only one last thing.

Turning towards the corner of the room, Gunther saw the boy lying slumped and asleep on the floor, surrounded by the



spilled contents of the bag he had given him earlier. Seeing the sedative he had put in the sweets had done its work, Gunther allowed himself the luxury of another moment of satisfaction.

He really had thought of everything.



**B**Y THE TIME the first peals sounded from the harbourmaster's bell calling midnight, all the preparations were in place. At the five corners of the pentagram the man-tallow candles had been lit, thin plumes of acrid smoke rising to join the sickly-sweet haze of incense hanging above them. At its centre, a section of the counter of the ruined bar had been set out as a makeshift altar with the unconscious boy bound and spread-eagled on top of it. Beside it, Gunther stood stoking a burning brazier, chanting the words of the final ritual.

Then, as the bell pealed its last, he heard the door to the room open and saw the blond-haired figure of Samael arrive with cloak flowing behind him in a gentlemanly flourish.

Careful not to allow his eyes to meet the daemon's gaze, Gunther continued his chant. From the corner of his eye he saw Samael advancing towards him. Coming to the binding circle the daemon stopped, raising his hand to press palm-outwards on the invisible barrier before him, testing its power.

'A binding circle? Impressive, Gunther, if ultimately pointless. After all, you can hardly stay within your circle forever, can you?' Then, hearing the sound of lapping water, the daemon finally looked behind him.

The trap had been surprisingly easy to build. Set to be triggered by a tripwire when the door to the room swung shut, a hidden mechanism had caused a gourd to tip, releasing a steady flow of water which, even now, fed a shallow circular channel

encompassing the entire outer circumference of the room. Of course, the real power of the trap lay not in channel, but in the nature of the water that flowed through it.

'Holy water?' the daemon said, eyebrows raised in sardonic amusement. 'It seems I am caught in the space between two impenetrable circles. Really, Gunther, you are full of surprises tonight. But tell me: now you have me where you want me, what do you intend to do with me next?'

On top of the counter, close to his right hand, one of Gunther's pistols lay primed and powdered, needing only a bullet to give it lethal force. And, glowing white-hot within the flames of the brazier, the bullet was almost ready.

It had taken fifty years spent in the study of forbidden texts to learn how Samael's bargains worked. Fifty years, in which he had slowly come to understand that when they had entered into their contract, Samael had lent him a tiny fragment of his own daemonic essence. A fragment so small that Samael would never miss it, but still powerful enough to stop Gunther from aging. Hence the time limit built into their bargain – as small as that fragment was, the daemon was not about to give up a part of himself forever. But at the same time, Gunther had learned this essence would not naturally flow back to Samael. It had to be taken.

And, if Gunther could kill Samael first, he could keep it forever.

Of course, killing a daemon was no easy thing. But, gifted with great wealth and a century in which to search for the answer, Gunther had finally discovered a method. In the brazier before him was a bullet forged from meteoric iron and covered in sigils which Gunther had paid a down-on-his-luck dwarf craftsman a small fortune to create. One of dozens of savants Gunther had paid to help him over the years without any of them ever knowing the true nature of his project. All of them working unknowingly towards the creation of a bullet ensorcelled to act as a bane to daemon flesh.

A bullet to kill a daemon.

Taking a pair of tongs, Gunther retrieved the glowing bullet from the fire and slotted it into the notch set in the side of the trocar. Even now, with his

own life in the balance, he could not be sure whether it was possible to kill a creature like Samael forever. At the very least though, killing the daemon here and now would banish him back to the daemon realms for a thousand years – more than long enough for Gunther to find a more permanent solution. But before the bullet could be used, the ritual demanded that it be tempered in the heart's-blood of a sacrificial victim. As to the nature of this victim, the terms of the ritual were very precise: Only someone possessed of a perfect and utter purity would do.

Abruptly, eyelids fluttering, the boy on the altar began to stir. But Gunther had come too far and risked too much to give in to squeamishness now. Besides, whether the boy died asleep or awake hardly mattered. Lifting the trocar above his head, Gunther stepped forward to complete the sacrifice. Only to see the boy's features suddenly seem to shift and blur, growing bigger. In an instant the boy was gone.

Staring in amazement at the alabaster-skinned female figure that had replaced him, Gunther found himself strangely attracted to the swelling curve of her hips, the sharp-toothed seductiveness of her smile and the jagged perfection of her horns. Then, as the writhing goddess before him lashed out with a scythe-like claw, Gunther found the growing warmth of his desire displaced by a more primal sensation.

Pain.



**A**FTERWARDS, watching the daemonette flaying the flesh from Gunther's dead bones, Samael found himself wondering briefly if he should punish her for her excesses. He had so wanted to see that last look of despair in the man's eyes when he realised his long life was finally over and torment awaited him. But, lost in her enjoyment, the

daemonette had killed him too quickly. Though, on balance, Samael decided to let the matter pass – it must have been difficult for her, after all, to have had to walk beside the mortal all night without tearing him apart. And, besides, the daemonette's purpose here was not yet done.

In her abandon, the daemonette had knocked over one of the pentagram's candles, breaching the binding circle. Approaching the altar, Samael saw the trocar lying on the floor where Gunther had dropped it and he stooped to pick it up. Inside, the bullet was still hot, the magical energies released by Gunther's ritual still waiting latent within it.

Turning towards the daemonette, Samael saw her pause in her mutilations to lick the blood, cat-like, from her talon. Looking into the amber irises of her eyes, Samael saw a perfect and utter purity, untainted by conscience or thoughts of compassion. Then, savouring that thought for a moment, he took the trocar and stabbed her in the chest.

'Why?' the daemonette asked him in Darktongue, her accent like the mewling of scalded cats.

'Because it would be a shame to let Gunther's work go to waste,' he told her, pushing the blade deeper into her heart. 'Especially when I spent so very long covertly guiding that dull-witted mortal on his quest.'

Strength fading, her heart's-blood ichor flowing down the tube of the trocar to temper the bullet inside it, the daemonette looked at him in incomprehension. Then, the memories of thousands of years' worth of sensations dying with her, her heart grew still.

Letting her body fall as he pulled the trocar from it, Samael was pleased to feel the stirring of painful energies emanating from within the bullet. In the end, the whole affair had come to a most satisfactory conclusion. After one-hundred-and-fifty years, the ritual – and the seventh boon – had finally been completed. The bullet was ready now. A bullet to kill a daemon.

One could never know when a thing like that might prove useful. ☛



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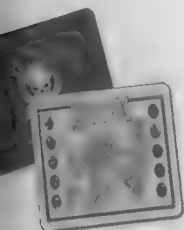
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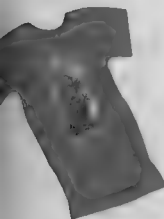
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# RELICS

A DOOM EAGLES STORY BY JAMES SWALLOW

**B**ROTHER DORAMACA let off another trio of bolter rounds and ducked down behind the broken stone, feeling the heavy boots of his power armour sink into the dark basalt sands. His breathing seemed impossibly loud inside the confines of his helmet, echoing with each heavy exhalation. Warning runes blinked back at him from the corners of his sight; a new salvo of incoming fire registered as bright traces on the visor display and his enhanced senses caught the dull smacks of impact noise as the enemy shots struck his cover.

He felt the sickly sensation of his skin crawling on his right arm, and glanced down at the limb. Despite the fact that his flesh ended at the stump of his elbow and his forearm was a construct of dulled steel, the Space Marine could still feel the phantom response as if the organic matter were still there. He'd lost the arm in a training accident, the bones and muscle crushed flat under the treads of a Predator, but part of his mind would not let go of it. The metallic replacement twitched around the grip of his bolter, clicking against his armour. Doramaca sucked in a breath and braced himself, bringing the gun to a ready stance. More shots keened over his head, the sound of their passage barely audible in the thin, gauzy atmosphere. The Marine chose his moment and vaulted up and over, pacing a pair of bursts toward his attacker. The shots were too wide of the mark for anything other than a lucky hit and were intended to make the foe keep his head down. Doramaca sprinted across the black sand towards a large dune; it would be a better vantage point and less exposed than his previous position.

Bolt shells snapped at his ankles, excavating small craters in the drifts around him. Puffs of dark ejecta flew

head-high in lazy, low-gravity clumps, rattling off his wargear and dirtying the gunmetal silver of his armour. He launched himself over the edge of the dune and rolled behind it. A brief moment of elation ran through him; but then it fled just as quickly as his legs lost purchase and he tumbled head over heels, the basalt sand sucking at him, dragging him to his knees. He cursed as his bolter was knocked from his fingers, desperately trying to stagger to his feet. The planet's damnable gravity was so much lighter than that of his native Gathis and, despite all his attempts, Doramaca had still not adjusted to it. This fact cost him the engagement. Teetering, he was blindsided by a point-blank bolter shot that hit him in the back of the head, and Doramaca unceremoniously fell face first into the black grit.

His adversary approached with a casual gait that made Doramaca's headlong rush seem manic in comparison. The other figure used the barrel of his bolter to nudge the young Space Marine and turn him over. 'Poor,' said his opponent. 'Very poor.'

Concealed behind his helmet, Doramaca's face flushed hot with anger and abashment. He reached up to wipe away the sticky patina of marker fluid that coated his visor, deposited there by the harmless impact of the frangible training ammunition. 'I... lost my footing,' he offered lamely.

'I can see that, lad. But you'll lose your head if you put yourself in an enemy's sights like that.' The other man took the Marine's bionic arm and hauled him to his feet. 'You became careless. You had avoided my detection for almost nine hours, but you let your eagerness overrule your better judgement. Now, collect your weapon and stand down.'

'Sergeant, I-' Doramaca began to protest, desperate to explain his mistake.

The other Marine, his armour identical but for a set of sergeant's insignia, silenced him with a gesture. 'No recriminations. No excuses. I expect my men to fight at the highest standard, and this is why we come to Serek to train. You failed today, but you will not fail tomorrow, understand?' The elder warrior did not wait for an answer and he nodded at the desolate landscape around them. 'Here, you get a second chance, but on a real battlefield you'll have no such luxury.' He tapped the winged skull sigil engraved on his shoulder pad. 'Death comes to a Doom Eagle soon enough, lad. Don't meet him halfway.'

Doramaca gave a sullen nod. 'Yes, Sergeant Tarikus.'

Tarikus's lip curled in a slight smile and he pointed. 'Join Colius. You two can continue the patrol alone.'

The sergeant watched the youth stride away to meet the other novice. The Marine was cocksure and arrogant, even for a member of the Adeptus Astartes and, as loathe as he might be to admit it to anyone else, Doramaca reminded Tarikus of himself in his younger years, before his potential had been harnessed and tempered. It was the sergeant's duty to mould the whelp into a battle brother truly worthy of the name, along with a handful of other junior Marines recently promoted up to full Doom Eagle rank. Tarikus had never really considered himself a teacher, but as the decades had gone by, he found more and more that he had a knack for it; he had developed a mentor's eye for the men around him, an ability to pick out the nascent skills in them and direct them for the good of the Chapter. And so, that role had brought him here again, returning for another sortie to the barren plains of Serek, where nothing dwelled except sand and rock and thin, razor-edged winds.

It was a planet bled dry of colour, a monochrome wilderness in shades of grey and black that extended from dark horizon to dark horizon. A patchwork world of stony foothills and monolith mountains, ebon sandscapes and endless bleak vistas where no life claimed dominion, not the smallest of hardy plants, not even bacteria.

Here, to this place that was the very definition of the word barren, the Doom Eagles sent their troops to make pilgrimage and to drill and train in the featureless wastes.

Tarikus found himself glad that his Chapter bore darts of red trim on their weapons and armour; Serek's colourless environment was so stark that it could convince a man that he had lost the ability to see anything but black and white.

The shifting sands played hoaxes on the eyes of the unwary, moving in slow ripples like a languid ocean. It was common for new arrivals to believe that unseen things lurked beneath the surface of the glassy deserts, as tricks of the light from Serek's white sun glittered off the basalt grains. Experience had taught him that Serek was as dead as the sacred relics gathered in the Doom Eagles Holy Reclisium.

Little evidence remained of the planet's previous occupants save the sad remnants of cities given up to the inexorable weight of the sands and the hard radiation of the sun. As Tarikus recalled, the Imperium's historians recorded evidence that Serek's populace had destroyed themselves in the last centuries of the Dark Age of Technology; they had stripped away most of their atmosphere in a single act of war, a vast nuclear conflagration the cause of which was lost to antiquity. They had died in their billions, and now nothing remained of them save the endless sands and stones that stood in mute contemplation of a dead world, no more than a grave marker for a forgotten, murdered people.

The air was so thin here that an unprotected human would quickly suffocate in it, but a Space Marine could go bare-headed with some effort, if circumstances demanded. Sometimes, Tarikus would remove his helmet and listen to the mournful winds, drinking in the despair and the terrible melancholy of the place. If I possessed the eye of a psyker, the sergeant considered, what would I see here? A landscape of ghosts from hill to valley? For the Doom Eagles, Serek was a keyhole glimpse into the landscape beyond death and, for Tarikus, a sobering reminder of his mortality. Little wonder



that the Chapter master had chosen this place as a training ground; if the neophytes who came here were as struck by it as Tarikus was, then Serek served its purpose well.

Presently, he crested a hill and from the mouth of a shallow cavern came the blink of light on silver as Brother Mykilus saluted. 'Ho, sergeant,' he called, 'What of our new recruit? Did he beat my score?'

Tarikus gave him a sideways look. 'Afraid he might outpace you?'

Mykilus made a gruff chug of amusement. 'Perhaps I made a wager on his performance.'

He gave Mykilus a hard look. 'You may compare your prowess when we are home on Gathis. For now, I require your most serious mind.'

The Marine replied with a terse nod, and they slipped into the cavern, pulling a camo-tarp over the entrance.

Nearby, a patch of sand shifted and sank as if pressed by an invisible footfall.



**B**ROTHER DORAMACA glanced at Colius, another of the novices assigned to the sortie. Where Doramaca was whipcord-strong and broad across the chest, Colius was stocky and thick around his muscles, short for a Space Marine but bold and fast on his feet. They moved quickly and silently, the cold starlight casting their weak shadows over the ground.

'How did you fare?' Colius asked after a while.

Doramaca spared him a look. 'We should be mindful of our patrol, brother.'

Colius frowned. 'Our instructors are not here now, Doramaca. We may speak freely for the moment.' He made a show of looking around the dark landscape. 'Besides, I'll warrant that we two are the only living things hereabouts.'

The other Marine replied with a cautious nod. Colius spoke the truth but it wasn't unknown for the veterans to place the odd target drone in the path of a trainee to see how they would deal with it. Or worse: deliberately give them a patrol pattern that strayed into a minefield.

'Well?' Colius pressed. 'Speak.'

'Tarikus located me and I was dispatched with a single shot.' The words tumbled out of Doramaca's mouth in a rush. 'I failed.'

'You're too hard on yourself, brother. I too was caught out by the caldera. Brother Korica laid a trap for me with tripwire.'

Doramaca shook his head. 'We are supposed to be the best, yet Tarikus and his men find it effortless to beat us. How can either of us hope to bring honour to the Chapter if we cannot outdo them?'

Colius smiled, 'Only the best come to train on Serek and we are meant to lose in these engagements. How else can Tarikus know the measure of our strengths and skills?' He shook his head. 'Our instruction did not end when we left the Eyrie. As the Emperor wills, we must strive to better ourselves for as long as we serve...'

When the other Marine did not answer, Colius paused in mid-stride and turned. Doramaca had halted a dozen paces behind him and was staring at the dark sands intently. 'What is it?' Colius asked.

'The sand,' Doramaca whispered.

Colius relaxed a little. 'Our passage disturbed it, nothing more.'

In reply, the youth drew out his auspex, examining the glyphs on its display. Colius saw the dim glow of the device as it blinked over Doramaca's faceplate. After a few moments, he grew impatient and beckoned his battle brother. 'Come now, Doramaca. You are allowing your ill humour to prey on your mind. We are alone out here.'

'Perhaps.' The other Marine did not sound convinced, but he put the sensor away and stepped onward.

Colius watched him approach, and he heard Doramaca's grunt of annoyance when his right boot sank to the knee, as a patch of sand slipped away underneath him. 'The Warp take this place,' the Marine snapped. 'Is there any solid ground on this

Light-forsaken dustball?' Doramaca's words were cut short with a gasp of pain as he stumbled, slipping to his haunches.

Colius took a step forward, extending a hand to help his comrade. Doramaca threw back his head and bit out an animal yelp of agony. 'My leg!'

Without warning, the sands around Doramaca's feet began to writhe, moving and shifting like storm-tossed waters. For one split second, Colius thought he caught a glimpse of something mirror-bright and shiny beneath the surface of the rolling grit, then it was gone. Doramaca discarded his bolter and pulled at his greaves, tugging on his leg as if it were caught in a mantrap. There was a cracking sound, muffled by the dust; the distinctive bone-snap noise of fracturing ceramite.

Colius hesitated, his bolter in his hands. Was this some sort of test? He spun around in place, scanning the horizon, searching for the bulky shapes of other Adeptus Astartes in power armour.

'Brother!' Doramaca's voice was high with pain and effort. 'Something... I can feel it inside my boot! Spines... Needle-' The Marine's words ran into one another, turning into a thin shriek. Colius crossed the distance to him, leading with his bolter. The tips of their gauntlets touched and then, with a sudden shock of motion, Doramaca shrank into the grip of the sand. One moment he was there, the next his torso was disappearing under the shifting black matter, arms flailing like those of a drowning man.

Brother Colius almost tripped over in surprise, but then all thoughts of rescuing Doramaca fled as the rippling, hissing sands spread out around him, the shuddering dust moving to rise in a wave. Acting on instinct, he let fly with a brace of shells, watching gouts of alluvium burst upward. The bolt shells were ineffective, cutting into the grit but doing little else to slow its whispering advance. Again, he saw the brief glimmer of starlight on something polished and silvery as it rushed toward him. Unwilling to follow Doramaca to his fate, Colius leapt clear of the shifting sands and ran for an outcropping of grey stone and, impossibly, the sinkhole came after him, licking at his heels.

With a cry of effort, Colius landed on the island of rock and threw himself flat. All around the edges of the outcrop, the black sand bubbled like boiling water.

Colius pressed his free hand to his helmet and called out, ignoring the strict protocol for radio silence that was part of the exercise. 'To arms! There's something in the sands! It took Doramaca!'



**I**N THE CAVERN, Tarikus silenced the rest of the squad with a throat-cutting gesture. In other circumstances he might have doubted Colius's words, but the panicked tone of the youth's voice was unmistakable.

'What idiocy is this?' grated Korica, 'The whelp has fallen into a sinkhole?'

Tarikus ignored the comment. 'Colius, you are mistaken. This planet is devoid of life.'

'No!' The young Marine's words cracked through the ear-beads of every assembled man in the camp. 'I saw it! A living thing, silver blades, under the sand!'

'Hold your position, lad,' Tarikus replied. 'We'll come to you.' The sergeant exchanged glances with Korica. 'You remain here with the other trainees. I'll take Mykilus and Petius to investigate.'

Korica frowned. 'Lord, this is some fool's errand.'

Brother Petius paused in gathering up his apothecary gear. 'What if it is not?'

The tiny motors in Korica's bulbous bionic eyes whined as they mimicked a narrow stare. 'Serek is nought but sterile rock, brother. Those pups are over-reacting.'

'Can you be sure?' Petius insisted. 'Certainly, in all the centuries that our chapter has come here, no life has been found.'

But what if it simply did not want to be discovered?' Petius replied.

Tarikus quickly loaded his bolter. 'Indeed. We are new to this sector of the planet, Korica. There may be dangers here we are not aware of.'

Korica accepted this with a shrug, and said no more. He was not convinced.

The sergeant pulled open the camo-cloak, pausing at the cavern's threshold. 'For now, it is my order that all training ammunition loads be replaced with warshot. If some xenos threat is out there, we must be prepared to kill it.'

Korica watched them go and, after a long moment, he reloaded his bolter.



**W**ITH TARIKUS gone, the Doom Eagles in the cave became muted and introspective. To keep their minds on their duties, Korica ordered the trainees to douse the biolumines and suit lamps and work in the near-darkness. They field-stripped their weapons in rotation to clean out the thick slurry of sand that gathered around the mechanisms of their bolters. Their implanted oculobes gave them vision far better than that of any low-light sensor, but still the cavern's thick gloom reduced the effective range of their eyesight. Korica irritably ordered one of the junior troopers to stand watch and let himself drift into a shallow trance; the Catalepsean Node in his brain took over and gently rested him, dropping his right cerebral hemisphere into a sleep while the left floated on the edge of wakefulness.

It had been so long since the Marine had slept in the manner as men understood it that the sensation was foreign to him. To utterly surrender oneself to temporary unconsciousness was unthinkable for an Astartes. Slow glaciers of thought wandered through Korica's mind as he became still; he felt a fuzzy, unfocussed disdain for Colius, a vague mental sneer at the youth's manner. Korica had considered Colius unworthy of promotion to Battle Brother status, but Captain Consultus had thought otherwise. Perhaps that might

change if the boy was showing his true colours now, panicking at nothing out there on the dark desert.

The trainees seemed to flash past in blurs. In the semi-sleep state, Korica's time sense was distorted as hours moved by him in what seemed like minutes. Dimly, he was aware of a faint haze of white light peeking through the camo-cloak. Serek's harsh sun was on the rise and with it came the curtain of radiation that would render all but short-range communications useless. Had Colius sent his call for help now, Korica mused, it would have been drowned in a sea of interference.

He heard the voices of the trainees then high-pitched yelps followed by quick, flat chugs of noise that could only be bolter fire. Suddenly, he was coming up from the depths of the Node's embrace, the silver blurs and flicks of firelight around him slowing and slowing until they resolved into Doom Eagles back-lit by the discharges from their weapons.

'Report.' The word stretched like tallow.

'In the walls!' One of the trainees shot back at him, as Korica bounced to his feet. 'Can't count them all-'

He dismissed the novice with gesture and jogged deeper into the cave, down toward the noise of the fighting. Along the way, his boot crunched over something metallic, but he did not pause to study it. Korica halted, fingering a shattered biolume hanging from the wall. He narrowed his eyes, straining to see, as more gun-flashes lit the dark.

The images came like static pict-prints on a slate, strobing off silver and black armour. Korica saw one young disciple clawing at his face as something like a dismembered steel hand clung to his throat, a single green eye hissing hot against his flesh. Another novice seemed to be missing an arm and more of the metal things were biting into his leg with bright sparks where razor mandibles chopped through ceramite. In the dimness, the cavern floor was writhing, a mass of cyclopean emerald glitters moving and crawling over one another. Korica found himself revising his opinion of Colius's call for help as he unleashed the fury of his bolter rifle into the shifting

flood of arthropod forms. Some of them clattered and broke where his rounds hit, but most of them just slid away from the blasts, turning and racing toward him in a tide. The armless novice collapsed and died against the cavern wall, and as Korica backed away he saw the beetle-things snatching at the fallen youth's armour, ripping components out of it and racing away with them clasped in their forelegs.

'Fall back!' he shouted over the general com channel. 'To the cave mouth!'

Then the walls popped like boils and hundreds more of the machines came at Korica from every side, emerging from cracks in the black sandstone in seething profusion. Bladed teeth with edges made of fractals sank into the Doom Eagle's shoulder and suddenly his gun arm, bolter and all, was lying on the floor, trailing streams of pink fluid. Korica did not even register the event until his nerves misfired and he roared with animal agony. The engineered Larraman cells in his blood went into overdrive, clogging the severed arteries and triggering endorphins to smother the incredible pain. Korica drove his fist into a beetle-thing that leapt across his chest and then ran heedlessly toward the cavern mouth. Behind him, he did not see the machines carefully remove the power armour from his severed limb, then discard the useless flesh.

Korica burst through the ragged, flapping orifice of the camo-cloak and stumbled to his knees. He caught sight of three more novices standing around him. Three, out of nine men.

The things would be only seconds behind him; they had come out of the walls, out of the sands and if Korica did not kill them now, then the four of them would die as well. 'Grenades!' he bellowed, tugging a quartet of krak munitions from his belt. Ignoring his pain, he chain-linked the detonators and then threw them with his remaining hand. The trainees followed suit and sent a dozen more gunmetal spheres looping into the maw of the cave. Korica saw the glint of hundreds of green eyes in there, but then the grenades blew all at once and the

cavern entrance turned into a heap of broken, jagged rocks.



**T**HEY FOUND Colius perched like a raptor on the prow of his stone island at sunrise, and he made no move to approach them as they came across the black sand, unaware that they were walking over the spot where Doramaca had been dragged away.

'Ho, brother.' Sergeant Tarikus waved at him. 'Report.'

The novice took a long time to answer. He pointed at the ground under Tarikus's feet. 'They took him. Gone in seconds. Like a sinkhole.'

Petius studied the youth. 'There are many points of subsidence on Serek.'

'A sinkhole with teeth,' Colius continued as if Petius had not spoken. 'Sinkholes don't have teeth.'

Tarikus drew himself up on to the stony outcropping. 'You found yourself some cover, then?' His voice was neutral. 'The... It couldn't get you up here, eh?'

Colius shook his head. 'They'll be back. They got what they wanted for now. They've already looted this place.'

Mykilus made a face. 'You're talking in riddles, boy. Explain yourself.'

'Already looted.' Colius repeated, and he knelt on the stone. 'See?'

Tarikus studied the patch of granite where the novice was pointing and his eyes narrowed. Cut into the stone were crude glyphs of grinning faces and toothed mouths. 'Ork runes,' he said quietly. 'But how can that be?'

'Saints of Terra,' Mykilus breathed. 'My lord, do you know what this is?' He pointed at the outcropping. 'This stone isn't native to Serek. It's heat-smoothed by orbital passage.'

'A meteorite?' said Petius.

'No,' Colius replied, and with a flourish he pressed his fingers into a narrow crack. Black sand puffed into the air and the



stone outcrop grew a hatch that opened into a hollow interior. 'It's an ork rok. A greenskin ship, hidden here in the desert like an iceberg under the ocean.'

Tarikus peered into the dark below. 'What did you mean when you said "looted", lad?'

Colius's face was grim. 'Come see, sergeant.'



**T**ARIKUS LEFT Mykilus and Petius on the tip of the rok and followed Colius into the void within. The trainee explained as they descended through ragged tubular corridors and jerry-built spaces daubed with aged orkish graffiti that in his alarm after Doramaca's abduction, he had scrambled on to the stone, thinking it a safe location, but all too quickly he had triggered the hatch and discovered that what he thought was solid ground was nothing more than an eggshell between him and the writhing things in the sands. Colius had not dared to venture in too far, lest the hidden predators swarm in through the numerous rents and gaps in the rok's patchwork hull. As he told his story, Tarikus stepped cautiously over the places where black sand pooled in the ork ship's interior.

It was impossible to tell how long the xenos vessel had been on Serek, certainly something in the order of hundreds of years, Tarikus guessed, no doubt long before the Doom Eagles had come to use the world for their purposes and long enough ago for the craft to have become buried in the sand. The impact crater it left had filled in and smoothed away. The manner of the rok's arrival was of no importance, however – the orks aboard it were clearly all dead and so the question of any possible greenskin presence was moot. The vile creatures were ill-suited for an environment such as Serek's poisoned landscape, and if some had survived, the sunlight would have riddled them with cancers within months if they hadn't

starved first. But it was not the manner of the rok crew's death that tugged at Tarikus but rather it was the state of their remains. Ork klans were notorious for self-mutilation and the commonplace use of clumsy bionics, even steel peg-legs and hooks for hands, but these ork bones, bleached white and crumbling to powder, had no metal attachments upon them. The Sergeant noted several skeletons with clear screw holes where iron teeth or metal limbs had once been attached, now vacant. Similarly, there were many spots inside the ship where the vessel's vital components had been torn out, gouged from the rock by the action of tiny claws.

'Scavengers,' said Tarikus quietly. 'All the dense and refined metals have been taken away.'

'Pillaged,' Colius nodded. 'Like a battlefield looter pulling gold teeth from men's skulls. It's why they took Doramaca. It's why they'll want to take us all.'

Tarikus let the youth's dispirited words pass without comment, concentrating instead on a huge rent in the side of the rok's ragged fuselage. 'Did you venture down this far before we arrived?'

'No, sergeant.'

The sergeant stepped up to the gaping hole, a space large enough to drive a Rhino through, and peered out. 'Do you see this? Perhaps these greenskin fools were the first to fall victim to whatever took our brother.' He gestured into the dark. 'Look here.'

Colius did as he was ordered and gingerly stepped up to Tarikus's shoulder. Beyond the exterior of the ork rok was an open cavern with walls lost in the darkness. It was ancient, a vast basalt-walled sphere formed millions of years earlier by expanding bubbles of molten magma. When it had crash-landed, the rok had penetrated the surface of the void and lodged there like a dart piercing an apple.

'There is a structure there,' the young Marine pointed at a shape in the far wall. 'Not orkish design.'

'No.' Tarikus studied the smooth archway through his helmet's optics. 'Human, perhaps, but I'll warrant it is nothing from the Imperial era.'

Colius fought to keep a tremor from his voice. 'What should we do, sergeant?'

Tarikus studied the arch. 'Investigate.'



**T**HERE WERE angry voices out on the sands and Tarikus emerged from inside the rok to find four more Doom Eagles clustered around the stone outcropping, one of them engaged in a spitting curse-fight with Petius. The sergeant recognised the configuration of Brother Korica's armour, but with a start he registered that the Marine was missing an arm. The three novices with him shifted uneasily, their hands never leaving the triggers of their bolters.

Petius removed an injector from Korica's stump and the Doom Eagle shook his head, as if that would banish the pain from him. He caught sight of Tarikus and made eye contact with him. 'Sergeant, I bring grave news.'

The tone of his voice told the tale. 'How many dead, Korica?'

Korica spread his good hand and his stump twitched; the medicine Petius had dosed him with made him slur a little. 'Only we remain.'

'He talked about steel beetles, sir,' Mykilus broke in, making a shape in the air with his fingers. 'Six-legged things with green eyes.'

Tarikus studied the horizon. 'It is well you located us, Korica. By night, you may not have found us out here.'

The other Marine jutted his chin at a rod-shaped device on Tarikus's belt. 'The teleport beacon, brother-sergeant. I had the trainees scan for its signals with their auspexes. Even Serek's star cannot mask those transmissions.'

'Indeed.' Tarikus took the device in his hand and considered it for a moment.

'We should leave this place,' Colius said in a low voice. 'Can you not activate the beacon and have us returned to our ship?'

The sergeant eyed the young Marine. 'Curb your fears, lad. We are the Adeptus Astartes and we do not flee from a bleeding.'

Mykilus made an off-hand gesture at the sky. 'It would not matter even if we did send the signal. Our ship is out of range... If we began the teleport recovery incantations now, our bodies would never reach the vessel. We would be scattered and lost, the very matter of us never to be reconstituted.'

'How long until the ship is close?' said one of the other novices.

'Not soon enough,' retorted Korica.

Tarikus returned the beacon homer to his belt and gave his assembled men a hard stare. 'Something inhuman lives on this world and by the Emperor, for every moment it draws breath it is an affront to the his divine will. These... machines crave iron and steel like a man does food and they will surely come for us if we do not search for them.' He tapped the breastplate of his armour for emphasis.

Korica was nodding his agreement. 'I saw them stripping a novice of every piece of wargear he wore. Filthy little despoilers, they took my arm just for the ceramite that cocooned it.'

'For what purpose?' Petius asked. 'What reasoning could there be to gather these scraps, like the pieces of some grotesque puzzle?'

'We shall endeavour to find out,' Tarikus grated. 'Pool your weapons and ensure that every man has equal ammunition and stores.'

Colius knew the answer to his question before he even asked it. 'What do you intend, Sergeant?'

'We'll take the Emperor's Light to these mech-beasts and burn them from their lair.'



**T**HE SERGEANT led the survivors down through the canted decks of the broken rok until they reached the

magma chamber. Tarikus did not pause or tarry to see if the novices were at his heels, he simply pressed onward, with Korica to his right and Brother Mykilus to the rear of the column. To his credit, Colius kept his own counsel as they descended, although it was clear to all of them that the young Marine's nerves were worn through. Glancing at him through the slit visor of his helmet, the apothecary, Petius, wondered what fate might befall Colius when they returned to Gathis. Tarikus was a fair commander, but he was an unforgiving taskmaster and the novice's behaviour would likely warrant some sort of negative citation at best. At worst, Colius might find himself reduced in rank or dismissed from line service.

The Doom Eagle's thoughts were interrupted as they reached the huge archway in the magma cavern's wall. Mykilus examined the stone, fingering the shallow cuts of runes in its surface. 'Some form of Low Gothic?' he said aloud.

Korica knelt, still a little unsteady from the cocktail of anti-shock potions coursing through his bloodstream, and picked at the rocky floor. 'There are tracks in the stone here, a finger deep. Lines of them, following the tunnels beyond the arch.'

'I've seen similar,' said one of the trainees. 'On Phaedra, in the outzones. They serve as guides for ore trucks between the mines and the smelter-cities.'

'Like a hive-world's pneu-trains,' Tarikus nodded. 'Yes, the lad has something there. This arch leads into transport arteries, the remains of some rail system created before the holocaust.'

'We go on, then?' said Petius.

'Need you ask?' Tarikus called over his shoulder, leading the way.

The tunnels spread out like the roots of a tree, a thick main line of six tracks that snaked down at a shallow angle, branching at intervals into tributaries that looped away toward unknown destinations. They passed the remains of massive stone surge doors that had been dropped to block the passage from the outside world, but the thick granite slabs were broken jagged teeth now, rent by a force so strong, so elemental in its

fierceness that even stone had been burnt by it. Tarikus examined the walls – there were more runes and the construction style had altered slightly. This part of the caverns had been built with defence in mind, with an eye towards military strength.

'Tunnels again,' Korica murmured, his surviving hand wandering to his bionic eyes. 'Always tunnels.'

'Look sharp,' snapped Tarikus, drawing him back to the moment at hand. Soon the pain from his wounds would return to the Marine, and the sergeant wanted to keep him focussed, not nursing the memories of old hurts inflicted in similar places.

It was Mykilus who found the body. He almost walked right past it and it was only the subtle shift of his biolum's light that alerted him. The dull glow from the lamp reflected off a flat, fish-belly white hummock of meat cast aside at the mouth of a drain trough. The Doom Eagle held up a hand to halt the rest of the unit and approached the thing. His voice cut through the still, blood-warm air. 'It's Brother Doramaca. What's left of him.'

Tarikus approached. 'His skin has been ruptured...'

Mykilus nodded. 'The scavengers stripped him naked and stole everything he carried.'

'And not just that,' Tarikus pointed to the corpse. 'Look there: his bionics have been torn out, and the sub-dermal armour carapace removed from beneath his flesh.'

The Marine knelt by the body, studying the precise razor-cut slashes in the dead soldier's integument. 'Whatever killed him did it without passion. This is the work of a cold and calculating mind.'



**A**ND WHEN IT was sure that the eight abhumans were fully occupied with the matter of their dead comrade, the calculating mind that had directed the death of Doramaca bid the larger of its servants to return to wakefulness and

harvest the men. Colius heard a skittering noise from overhead as hinged leg-flaps moved against the black stone roof. He looked up to see a faceless block of machined metal staring back at him, lit by a clump of luminous emerald optical sensors.



**T**HE STEEL THING released its grip from the ancient bricks and dropped on him, cutting in a gravitic pulse just feet from the ground to soft-land. The throb of the null-field knocked Colius on to his rear. He saw two more of the shield-shaped insect forms dropping into the midst of the other Doom Eagles just seconds before the roar of bolters echoed down the tunnel. The novice aimed at where he thought the massive beetle machine was and opened fire. The six-legged mechanoid skipped sideways, its claw-feet flicking up sparks, and it snapped at one of the other Marines. With smooth, economical movements the insectile robot cut him in two with scythe-like talons and moved on to seek out another target, disgorging a couple of its smaller scarab-shaped brethren to set to work on the corpse. Colius shot at it again, a grin popping into life on his face as his rounds found the thing's silvery hide.

In the midst of the ambush proper, Korica braced his bolter as best he could and unloaded the a clip into another one of the machines. He swore at it for daring to take his arm from him and challenged it to try and take the rest. The mechanoid's blocky head bobbed in some analogue of quizzical consideration and then the creature surged forward. Korica's gun ran dry in the instant the enemy swatted it from his hand and he back-pedalled, fingers finding his combat knife without any conscious orders from his mind. The spidery machine paused, rearing up to present its claws, and that was enough for Korica to leap back at it. He buried

the blade up to the hilt in the robot's braincase and the Marine's action was rewarded with a hissing gout of sickly green sparks. Petius came to his aid, tossing Korica a reload with one hand and emptying his bolter into the wounded target with the other. The machine shivered and.

'Doom Eagles! To me!' Tarikus roared out the order and the Marines shifted to regroup around the veteran's position, laying down streaks of enfilading fire. Mykilus dropped to one knee, unlimbering the multiple shot missile launcher on his shoulder to a firing position. Back along the tunnel in the direction from which they had come, he could clearly see more shapes skittering down the walls in jerks of movement and the Marine felt his gut tighten. They had walked right beneath these machines as they waited dormant above them and not a single one of their auspexes had detected the hulking things lying there. Mykilus shuttered the thought away and spoke a litany under his breath as he turned the launcher from safe mode to a firing state.

Tarikus placed a heavy hand on his shoulder and jerked his head at the roof. 'Too many of them coming, lad. You know what to do, eh?

The Doom Eagle brought the weapon up to his shoulder and the sighting lens dropped into place over his left eye. Through the optic he caught the flash-frame sight of one of the novices bifurcating under enemy claws. He squeezed the trigger and fired.

A cluster warhead looped out of the launcher tube and spat orange fire across the tunnel. The machines paused to watch it pass over them and it struck the cavern roof, filling the air with tumbling rocks. Mykilus felt friendly hands dragging him back as a curtain of obsidian dust rolled forward. Black grit clouded his visor.

It seemed like an eternity, but when the rumbling stopped, he cleaned the sand away and found that a new wall had grown up between the Marines and the machines. Colius helped him to his feet and gestured toward a square of pale



yellow light – a hatchway in the distance. Without waiting to see if anything was still moving under the curtain of stones, he followed the novice with a wordless nod.



**I**T'S A CONTROL bunker,' Tarikus was saying as the last of the Doom Eagles caught up with him. 'As I suspected, this part of the tunnels was not built for civilian use.' The bunker's door lay fallen behind him, dislodged by the shockwave from the cave-in.

Petius looked around the vast, shallow room. Banks and banks of silent machinery lined the walls, thick with dust. Incredibly, a few of them still glowed with faint light. Mykilus joined him as they peered at one screen that showed a flickering map of Serek's surface.

'These lines about the planet,' Petius noted, 'more tunnels, perhaps?'

Mykilus shook his head. 'No, brother, see here.' He pointed at a jagged set of symbols. 'These are the edges of the planet's tectonic plates. Fault lines.'

'Touch nothing,' Tarikus said sharply. 'There may be booby-traps.'

Colius beckoned the sergeant to one of the other consoles. 'This one shows a human. It could be a log of some kind.'

Tarikus removed his helmet and leaned close to the blurry panel. True to Colius's words, the pale face of a terrified man glimmered there, his mouth frozen in the midst of a cry for help. The Marine touched a single glowing glyph on the screen and in a rush the display threw up a procession of jarring, disconnected images.

He saw pictures of majestic cities reaching into skies that were raining green fire; dark pyramid obelisks shimmering into solidity in the midst of screaming civilians, carpets of silver scarabs rushing like floodwaters, rending and tearing, skeletal figures advancing over broken bodies and symbols, lines and circles in

complex patterns. The garbled speech of the man sputtered from the console's speaker, an incoherent stream of thick sibilants punctuated with one recurring word.

'Necrontyr.' Tarikus repeated the name, and it felt alien on his tongue.

Now the man was showing a console like the one where Petius stood and, with a grim, grey face, he activated the controls. The display showed death-black clouds emerging across the sky, humans and machines alike cooking in murderous firestorms; but something was wrong, and the man slumped to his feet, weeping over a display of blinking red icons. Tarikus has seen the same thing in battle, the man's nerve had failed him and for that his whole world had suffered. As the replay ended, he looked down and realised that he was standing in a patch of dull powder: the dusty remains of the messenger.

'I understand this,' Mykilus said, after a moment. 'The people here, they attempted to detonate geo-nuclear charges. They intended to destroy their world rather than let those machines take it.'

Tarikus nodded. 'But our friend here could not complete his orders. The weapons did not all detonate, so only the atmosphere was scourged.'

The other Marine examined the trigger console. 'This control is still live. The charges below remain in ready mode, even after millennia.'

The sergeant was about to speak, but a shout cut him off.

'Sergeant!' One of the novices called from his post at the hatchway. 'Something approaches!'

All eyes saw the novice die, from outside the room a wreath of green flame enveloped the youth and it flayed him. Ceramite, flesh and bone were seared from him in screaming flickers of light, turning the Marine into twists of blackened matter barely identifiable as human. Before his remains had settled, the open doorway disgorged a swarm of scarabs and the larger forms of the spider-machines. They surged into the bunker chamber, flowing up over the walls like fast-growing fungus.

No orders were needed. The Doom Eagles opened fire as one and channelled every ounce of their battle prowess into killing the mechanoids.

Tarikus cursed himself. He had unwittingly lead his men into a trap, bottling them up here inside the control room, and now these necron things would have them all as trophies. The sergeant clasped the teleport homer. This deep below ground, he had no way of knowing if the strike cruiser orbiting the planet was in range, or even if the matter transporter would be able to recover them if he activated it. Tarikus weighed the device in his grip and thumbed the activation stud regardless. In seconds, it would be fully charged – and he would decide what to do when that moment came, and before.

Then something else entered the room. Perhaps if someone who had never seen a human skeleton had been asked to build one from a second-hand description, then this is what they would have made. It seemed to shimmer and move in blinks of motion, one moment here, the next over there, impossibly travelling without moving. The skeleton-thing walked through its insectile army with the surety of a warlord among helots, glistening bright metals showing across it like polished jewels. Weapons fire seemed to slide off the necron lord, vanishing into the arcs of electric energy that webbed the air around it.

Colius shot it in the head, and Tarikus clearly saw the bolt shells pass through the mechanoid's skull as the steel briefly became insubstantial. With cold light glittering in its eye-sockets, the lord turned its terrible visage on the youth. Hot streaks of energy licked out of its vision slot and flensed him apart before he could conjure a scream. The necron drifted over Colius's body toward Tarikus, claws like a bouquet of butcher knives extending out toward him. Like all its minions, it was utterly silent in its purpose.

The homing beacon went hot in the sergeant's hands and he made a sudden, terrible decision. 'Mykilus!' he shouted, 'Detonate the geo-charges!'

The Marine hesitated, but only for a moment. 'Aye!' he replied, dropping to his knees in cover behind the trigger console. Tarikus drew back from the advancing necron, closing the distance between himself and the rest of his men.

Korica was yelling challenges to the machines as they clustered around them, slowly and inexorably. 'Come, take me if you can, xenos! I defy you!'

Tarikus gripped the beacon and held it up, locking gazes with the lord. He could see it clearly now, the full shape of the man-form illuminated by the witch-fire that danced about it. It was a patchwork of metals, limbs and parts of its framework clearly forged from the scavenged pieces that the scarabs had gathered. A segment of the humanoid's gunmetal ribcage glinted and Tarikus felt a cold fury. The thing had stolen parts of Doom Eagle armour to rebuild itself and to see his chapter's wargear in so corrupted a form filled the Marine with righteous hate.

For a moment, he fancied that the necron understood what he intended to do next, but he would never know for sure.

'Ready!' Mykilus called, a nest of wires trailing from his auspex to the blinking control panel. 'By your command!'

'Stand to!' Tarikus shouted, and the survivors closed ranks. 'Now!'

Deep beneath the surface of Serek, a command that had been delayed for untold centuries now came, and the patient engines of destruction that lurked in the abyssal depths of the planet were finally, irrevocably unleashed. In the bunker, the necrons were held back as a globe of coruscating energy enveloped the Space Marines, the edge searing off the tips of the piecemeal warlord's razor fingers.

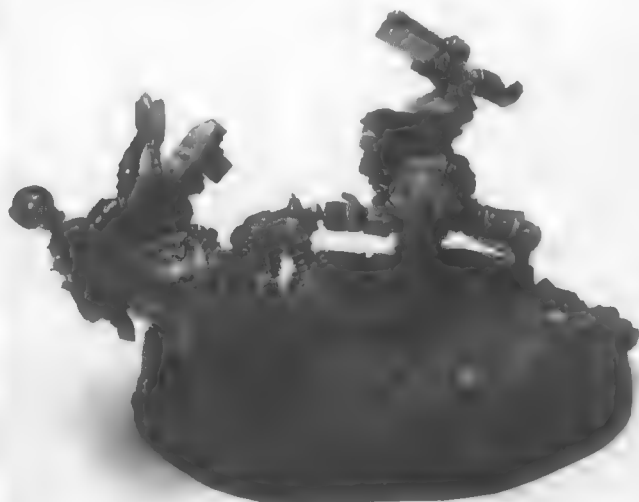
As Serek tore itself apart around them, Tarikus saw the Necrontyr machine's face shift and melt as the teleport cycle began, every atom in his body singing as the arcane technology reduced him to pure energy. With the last ounce of his will, he cursed the necron lord with the wrath of the Emperor, Aquila, and the Doom Eagles. ♥

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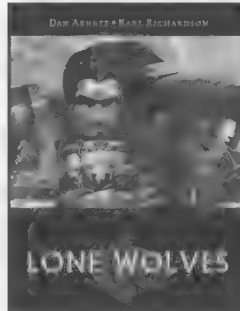
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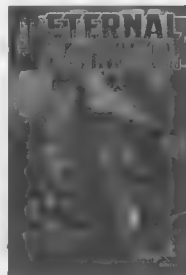
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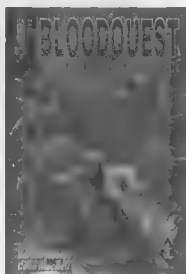
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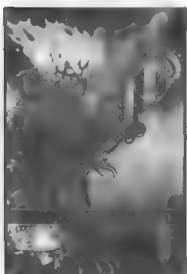
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THIS IS ARAKI, A  
WORLD AS DAMNED  
AND DEGRADED AS  
ANY PLANET IN THE  
EYE OF TERROR.

IN THIS REALM OF UNRESERVED CHAOS, THE  
ONLY THING THAT RESEMBLES ORDER IS THE  
CENTURIES OLD CONFLICT THAT RAGES  
BETWEEN TWO ASPIRING CHAOS LORDS.

THE FIRST, TOXUS THE DECAYED, HOLDS SWAY  
OVER THE NORTHERN FLAGGE FIELDS OF ARAKI.



NURGLE,  
FOUL MASTER OF  
FESTILENCE, PLEASE ACCEPT  
MY POX-RIDDEN WORKS AS  
YOUR OWN. MAY THE BATTLE  
SCABS OF OUR ENEMIES  
FESTER WITH  
DECAY!

WHILST THE SOUTHERN WASTELANDS BELONG  
TO XAARN THE ANNIHILATOR, A DEVOTED  
CHAMPION OF KHORNE THE BLOOD GOD.



OUR LUST FOR  
BATTLE IS AS PURE HATE! AND IT WILL  
NEVER BE SATIATED UNTIL TOXUS AND ALL HIS  
DEGRADED FOLLOWERS ARE CRUSHED  
BENEATH OUR MIGHTY BATTLE  
AXES!

THEIR STRUGGLE TO OUTDO ONE ANOTHER IS ONE OF VANITY. WITH  
EACH DESIRING RECOGNITION ABOVE ALL ELSE. RECOGNITION AS  
LEADERS WORTHY OF THEIR PATRONS' GIFTS AND ATTENTIONS.

BUT THIS TALE IS NOT ABOUT THEIR  
PETTY BATTLE FOR SUPREMACY

THIS TALE IS ABOUT ARAKI'S  
MUTANT HORDES, DRIVEN BY  
A SINGULAR UNHOLY DESIRE  
TO WAGE WAR IN THE NAME  
OF THEIR CHAOS LORDS.  
THIS TALE IS ABOUT...

# THE BAD, THE WARPED & THE INSANE

SATHER ONE,  
SATHER ALL!

I, DURMUK  
THE VILE, BRING NEWS FROM THE  
GREAT XAARN HIMSELF! A CRUSADE IS  
NIGH, AND HE WANTS YOU, UNWORTHY  
WASTELAND SCUM THAT YOU ARE,  
TO JOIN HIM.

FOR TOO LONG THE  
DISEASED HORDES OF TOXUS  
HAVE POLLUTED ARAKI WITH  
THEIR RETCHED PLAGUES.  
BUT THE TIME HAS COME  
TO SAY ENOUGH!

YOU SAY  
YOU ARE DEVOTED TO  
XAARN AND WILL LAY DOWN  
YOUR PITIFUL LIVES IN HIS  
NAME. BUT I SAY THEY'RE  
JUST WORDS.

NOW IS  
THE TIME FOR  
ACTION!

TO SEE IF  
YOU ARE TRULY WORTHY  
OF JOINING HIS GREAT CRUSADE,  
XAARN CHALLENGES YOU TO BRAVE  
THE PERILS OF MOUNT  
EBON.

WAITING  
AT ITS PEAK ARE TRANSPORT  
SHIPS, THAT WILL TAKE YOU TO  
THE NORTHERN PLAGUE  
FIELDS.

FROM  
THERE, WE WILL LAUNCH  
A DEVASTATING ASSAULT ON  
TOXUS AND HIS  
RANCID...

THAT'LL DO,  
DURMUK. KNOW  
ENOUGH ALREADY, YES?  
DON'T NEED TOO MUCH  
COMPETITION.

ROWRK!  
ITSSS KARDUN THE  
REAYER!

THANKS  
FOR SAVING THE  
INTRODUCTION! NOW, I BE  
FIRST ONE ON TRANSPORT.  
ANYONE WANT TO  
ARGUE?

GROWLF!  
RIP YA LIMB  
FROM LIMB,  
LADSSS!

HEH!  
HOPING YOU SAY  
THAT.

BLAM!

PAH! THOSE AMATEURS NOT PUT UP MUCH OF FIGHT.

EH?

CRICK!  
K  
R  
U  
N  
G  
H!

GRAAAARRR  
GH!

SNEAKY, SNEAKY! EAT GUN, GOREBEAST!

UT!

HE-HE-HE!  
GOREBEAST MAKE MINCEMEAT OUT OF MIGHTY MUTANT. HE HE-HE!

CHOMP!

BLAM!

YEH!  
YOU NO LOOK SO GOOD NOW.

COUGH  
NOT... DEAD...  
YET!

TCH! THAT WOUND LOOK BAD. RECKON YOU MAKE IT THROUGH US AND STILL REACH TOP OF MOUNTAIN, BIG BAD KARDUN?



AH!  
CONGRATULATIONS,  
WARPED ONE. YOU ARE THE FIRST  
TO MAKE IT UP TO THE PEAK.  
THE CHARIOT OF DOOM  
AWAITS!

YOU MUST  
HAVE OVERCOME SOME  
OF THE MIGHTIEST SCUM ON THIS  
PLANET TO MAKE IT THIS  
FAR!



HEH!  
NOTHING WORTH  
PUTTING TO PARCHMENT  
ABOUT.



TAKE YOUR  
PLACE ON BOARD. AS SOON  
AS WE HAVE A FULL COMPLIMENT,  
WE LEAVE FOR THE PLAGUE  
FIELDS!



HA! NO  
MUTIE GOOD ENOUGH  
BEAT KARDUN UP NOW  
EBON!



HUNK!  
IS THAT A FACT? BAROK  
MIGHT HAVE SOMETHING TO  
WHEEZE! SAY ABOUT  
THAT!



HEADING  
OUT ON A CRUSADE AGAINST  
THE GREAT 'SSSSSUT!' TOXUS, ARE  
WE? LOOKS LIKE BAROUK MADE  
IT HERE JUST IN  
TIME!

YOU XAARN  
DOGS ARE NOT EVEN WORTHY OF 'HUNH!'  
DYING ON THE HALLOWED, PUS-RIDDEN  
PLAGUE FIELDS!

NO, MUCH  
BETTER THAT YOU 'HFFF!' DIE  
HERE INSTEAD!

POK!

AH, PERHAPS  
SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN SO  
EAGER TO BE FIRST ON  
TRANSPORT.

PERHAPS  
SHOULD HAVE GOT  
NEXT TRANSPORT,  
YES?

SHA-KA-  
BOOOM!

THE BAD, WARPED & INSANE END!



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# THE CUCKOO OF HAMMERBILDT

by  
James Peaty

**M**ORNINGS IN Hammerbildt were always the same. Summer or winter, it didn't matter. The wind would whip down into the valley from the top of Hammer Hill and bite through the town like a merciless animal, boring through flesh and bone as if they weren't there.

As Gudrun approached the stream, sheets bunched untidily under her arm, her thoughts were not focused on how cold it was or how uncomfortable it would be scrubbing the washing in the icy stream. No, today all she could think about was Tobias.

It would be a lie if she'd said she didn't find the attention flattering – and most girls of Gudrun's tender years would have found being the focus of an older man's affections as being more than that – but it had become a problem and people, as they always did in Hammerbildt, were beginning to talk.

It wasn't that Tobias's persistence was a problem – that was the part that Gudrun liked – but it was more the way in which he chose to express it.

Hanging around the farmhouse at night was one thing, but breaking in and waiting for her to come back from the market, as he had done just two evenings previously, was too much.

Gudrun had let him know this in no uncertain terms.

It wasn't that she didn't have feelings for Tobias, it was just that she had ambitions, dreams of a life away from Hammerbildt that he could not understand or contemplate. She wanted to do things that staying within the confines of the cramped wooden town of her forefathers just wasn't compatible with.

As she knelt down to begin washing the sheets Gudrun noticed something.

She knew these waters well and one thing that they were famous for was their clarity. But today the water was cloudy.

On closer examination, the water was tinged a familiar shade of dark brown.

Gudrun began to move upstream towards the source of the pollution. She was sure that a rabbit or some such animal had been mauled by a wolf or fox and had fallen into the river and died. Yes, that was it, nothing more unusual than that.

She was wrong.

It was no rabbit, wolf or fox. It wasn't even a horse, though one – saddled, carrying three heavy looking sacks and bearing scratches from riding through the surrounding forest – was grazing idly on the opposite bank of the stream.

The source was a man, laying sprawled on his back at the waters edge, the blood from several wounds polluting the stream.

He looked to be in his mid thirties, tall, dark haired and wearing the colours of the elector count of Stirland.

Gudrun was speechless, convinced the man was dead and that she would somehow have to move his body from its resting place on the bank of the stream.

It was then that the man began to stir.



**T**HE SALTED lamb tasted awful and the water tasted no better, but both would strengthen them for the days search ahead.

The leader of the three, a broad shouldered man named Stein, swilled his water and looked out into the woods surrounding him. How could they have been so stupid as to leave it unguarded? Luckily the bastard had only taken a small percentage of the money, but even that was too much.

Stein looked over at his two companions, Mahler and Rheimer, as they devoured their breakfast. As he watched them eat he was overcome by contempt for them both. It was their fault this had happened, if they'd sorted out the watch rotas properly then things would have been different.

But Stein knew it was no use. He was in charge and ultimate responsibility rested with him. They had to either find the money or bring the bastard's body back with them.

'Eat up, we can't waste anymore time.'

Mahler looked at Stein with an expression of disbelief.

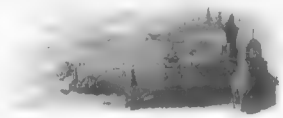
'But I've only just...'

Stein looked at him with disgust. Rheimer touched his companions arm.

'We can eat on the way.'

Stein rose from his haunches and moved towards his horse. He mounted, his limbs stiff with early morning rust. He was getting too old for this nonsense.

'Come on. We have a thief to catch.'



**T**OBIAS AWOKE to the sound of banging. Hastily dressing, he flew down the stairs and unlocked the heavy oak door. Standing on the doorstep was Tristan, the local blacksmith and fellow member of the Hammerbildt town guard.

'Sleeping in again, Tobias? People will talk.'

Tristan was a small, squat man, with a huge amount of hair all over his body. The joke among the locals was that Tristan was in fact a strategically shaved dwarf. Tristan took the joking in good humour.

'Let them talk.'

Tobias was half asleep and his eyes hurt from the bright light in the street.

'What are you doing here at this unholy hour, Tristan? I thought you had horses to shoe?'

'I only ever shod horses for your late father at this hour of the morning and besides, these days I'm semi retired. My boy runs the smithy for me now.'

Tobias knew this was a lie. Everyone in Hammerbildt knew that Tristan's son, Hanu, was the laziest man in town. In name he now ran the smithy, but if anyone wanted anything done they still went to see Tristan.

'But I digress, seems this morning your Miss Yorst found a stranger sprawled in the stream.'

The last vestiges of sleep left Tobias on hearing this.

'Is Gudrun alright?'

Tristan smiled.

'Oh, she's fine and taken the stranger into her home, I hear. Fellow from Stirland, so the rumour goes.'

Tobias couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'Taken him in, you say?'

'Yes, out like a light he was. Cut up, bleeding, in a right old state. We're having a meeting tonight in the tavern to decide whether we offer the fellow sanctuary or turf him out into the wilds. Never be too careful is my motto. See you at the meeting then?'

Tobias stood in the door, digesting what Tristan had just told him.

'Tobias?'

'Yes, sorry. I'll see you later.'

Tobias closed the door and sat in his father's old chair by the fire. Tobias had eggs to collect and cows to milk, but he couldn't concentrate on any of those things.

All he could think of was Gudrun.



**K**AHN AWOKE with a start. He was lying in bed in a room with the shutters closed. Where was he? How did he get here? As he pulled the covers from his body, trying frantically to get to his feet, he realised he was naked.

What was going on?

As he settled back onto the bed his body seemed to come alive. He was in pain from the cuts on his arm and legs and a huge bruise down the left hand side of his torso. What happened after a certain point was a jumble in Kahn's mind, but he remembered falling from the horse as it took a drink from a stream. How long had he been riding? Six hours? Twelve? He couldn't recall. And where was the...

As he wracked his brain, trying to create some semblance of order from the anarchy of his own thoughts, the door to the bedroom slowly opened.

Kahn climbed back under the covers. Coming into the room was a young woman of no more than twenty. She was dark-haired, slender and had a sharp face. In her hands was a tray bearing a mug of steaming liquid and some homemade oatcakes.

The young woman smiled at him in a way that disarmed even the confused Kahn.

'Good to see you're finally awake.'

She placed the tray on the bed in front of him.

'I thought you might be hungry. Are oatcakes to your liking?'

Kahn slowly nodded his head, not sure if he was still asleep.

'Good. Your clothes have been washed and are on the line. They'll soon be dry, just in time for the meeting.'

Kahn thought his head was about to explode.

'What meeting?'

'The town guard want to speak to you about what happened.' Gudrun paused for a second. 'You can remember what happened?'

Kahn nodded again.

'Excellent. I'm sure Herr Klose will take a favourable line on someone who's obviously been badly hurt by bandits. I mean, you looked really bad when I found you in the stream, but you seem better now.'

She began to blush

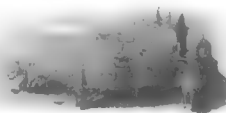
Kahn smiled. Did everyone around here talk so fast?

Gudrun extended her hand.

'I'm Gudrun. Gudrun Yorst.'

Kahn looked at her hand before taking it in his own. Her fingers were long and sinuous, unlike his, which were shorter and more compact. He looked up at her and forced a smile.

'Call me Kahn.'



**'N**ONSENSE!

'Please Tobias, be reasonable.'

'I would if I could, Herr Klose, but I can't accept this.'

Klose was surprised. In all his years as Captain of the Hammerbildt town guard he had never seen Tobias this animated. A big man, some would say bordering on the podgy, Tobias had joined the town guard as soon as he was able and had a reputation for saying very little.

His father had wanted him to be a soldier, just like Tobias's childhood friend Janeck, but the glory of Sigmar did not smile upon Tobias in the same way, cursing him with a chest complaint that left him short of breath on occasion.

As Tobias continued his tirade, Muller, the youngest member of the guard, broke off from smoking his pipe and shook his head in dismay.

'Bluster to one side, I think we need to have an open mind here.'

Tobias looked over at Muller. Lean and oily in appearance, the two men had never been friendly. Tobias had always felt that beneath Muller's veneer of charm and measure beat a deeply unpleasant heart.

'How can we have an open mind? We know nothing about this man.'

'It would seem to me,' Muller intoned between puffs on his pipe, 'that your displeasure at his arrival has more to do with your complicated situation with Gudrun.'

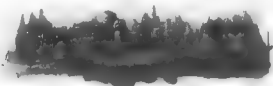
Tobias reared up from his seat towards Muller.

'I ought to—'

Tristan swiftly moved in.

'Easy...'

For a small man, Tristan was incredibly strong, but even he struggled to hold Tobias back. Tobias would have eventually broken Tristan's grip and made a move for Muller if the assembled company hadn't been disturbed by Gudrun and the wounded Kahn arriving early.



**G**UDRUN WAS nervous as she stood before the men. She avoided eye contact with Tobias, who had moved away from Tristan and was standing in the far corner of the room. It seemed to her that if he couldn't have seemed further away he had been standing at the top of Hammer Hill.

Finally she spoke.

'Gentlemen, may I introduce Herr Kahn.'

All eyes trained on Kahn who was wrapped in a blanket, his face bruised and scabbed from his fall. He was shivering too, although whether that was down to the excessive cold in Hammerbildt that day or a fever, no one could say.

Kahn looked around the room at the four men. Three of them trained their gazes on him expectantly, while the remaining man – a large, dark haired hulk of a figure – stared at Kahn with barely concealed fury. Kahn brushed this aside and focused his attention on the other men.

'As Gudrun has already said, my name is Kahn, a humble servant of Stirland and your most grateful guest.'

Kahn looked over and saw the large man playing with his fingernails. It was irritating, but Kahn didn't let it put him off.

'While transporting a war debt for the elector count of Stirland I was ambushed by three bandits disguised as fellow servants of my province.'

Kahn paused, coughed and then continued.

'I tried to stop them but I was alone and they had avarice in their eyes.'

Gudrun looked around the room. Tobias had retreated to the corner by the taverns bar and was staring out of the window, trying not to show even remote interest in Kahn's words. The mood of the rest of the room was hard to gauge, but Gudrun surmised it would be more amenable than Tobias's.

After listening to Kahn, Klose rubbed his chin with his right hand, trying to appear more thoughtful than he could ever actually be. He took a moment before speaking.

'And what about these bandits?'

Kahn held his side, obviously in pain. He seemed agitated at the questioning.

'I do not know. They have their gold, they believe me to be dead. I have no power to read the runes, sir.'

Klose paused, removed his hand from his chin to signify that he had ceased his analysis and then responded.

'Herr Kahn, your story is intriguing and I am not convinced that we have seen the last of these bandits you mentioned, but it is my opinion that we should allow you to rest and recuperate here in Hammerbildt.'

Kahn was about to thank him when a sharp pain in his side caused him to double over. Gudrun moved swiftly and grabbed Kahn's arm. She held him up, allowing him to catch his breath, before



thanking Klose on Kahn's behalf and leading the wounded man away.



**T**HE MEETING over, the town guard began to file out of the tavern. As Tobias was about to move out of the tavern's main entrance, he felt a tap on his back. He turned to see Klose standing behind him.

'This behaviour is very out of character for you, Tobias.'

Tobias didn't respond.

'Now, I know this may be hard for you to take, but it would seem that Gudrun will have a house guest for a little while yet.'

Tobias ground his jaw before replying. 'And?'

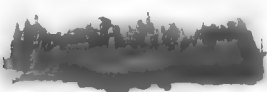
Klose smiled at Tobias.

'I do hope you'll be a good man and take a bottle of mead to our convalescing guest. On behalf of the town guard, of course.'

Tobias wanted to smash the smile clean off of Klose's face, but he resisted the urge. In all his years as a member of the guard, Tobias had never known the older man to make a correct decision. It was a joke among the other men: beware Calamity Klose.

He never voiced his own displeasure with this state of affairs because his father had always told him that you respected your superiors' decisions no matter how nonsensical. It was a mode of behaviour that he had followed in life and one that had made him supremely miserable. But yet again, rather than say that he thought Klose was uttering the biggest pile of drivel he had ever heard, Tobias resisted. He smiled back through gritted teeth.

'It would be my pleasure.'



**A**S GUDRUN stirred the urn of soup she looked up at Kahn. His lined and bruised face was bathed in the crackle of the flames from the fire. She thought he

looked at once like a mischievous child and a mordant old man.

'Eat up, it'll do you good,' Gudrun said, handing Kahn the carved wooden bowl her late father had made so many years before.

Kahn blew on the wooden spoon before sipping down the thick broth. It tasted good. Thick root vegetables mixed with fine chicken in a stock that wasn't too thick or too thin. It was the best Kahn had tasted in a long time.

He thanked Gudrun and proceeded to drink down the whole bowl in mere seconds. It burnt his tongue but he didn't seem to notice.

'More?'

Kahn extended his bowl out to the young woman, who knelt before him. She took it from his hands, her fingers lightly brushing the edge of his hand.

Kahn looked up at Gudrun. She was pretty and her body was lean, but her face belied a hard life and there was a survivor's darkness in her eyes. He liked that.

As he finished off the second bowl of soup, Gudrun finally came to rest on the floor. She wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and sat in front of the fire.

'That was delicious.'

Gudrun smiled.

'Thank you. It was my mother's recipe.'

Kahn wipe his mouth with the back of his hand.

'And where is the woman, so I can thank her?'

Gudrun's face darkened and a sadness covered her like a shroud.

'She's buried out the back.'

'Oh...'

'She passed away in the spring.'

'I'm sorry.'

Gudrun paused, looking into the flames of the fire.

'These things happen.'

There followed an uncomfortable silence. Kahn wanted to speak, but couldn't. It was Gudrun who raised her voice above the crackle of logs.

'How did you find the town guard meeting?'

Kahn smiled.

'It was fine, although that big fellow in the meeting was definitely not interested in what I had to say.'

'Pay no attention to him.'

'You know him?'

Gudrun moved as if she'd just caught a chill.

'You could say that.'

Kahn was curious.

'What does that mean?'

Gudrun looked away before finally turning back and facing Kahn. She stared at him, her blue eyes boring into his face with taut intensity.

'He asked me to marry him.'

Now it all made sense.

'And you declined?'

Gudrun stood up. The shawl hung loosely over her shoulders.

'I haven't given him my answer yet. Tobias's idea of a future is to raise a family here and stay in Hammerbildt forever.'

Kahn thought that sounded like a fate worse than death.

'Before my mother died maybe I would have settled for that, but on her death bed she made me promise that I wouldn't make the same mistake as her and stay in this town.'

Kahn got to his feet. He moved towards Gudrun and placed his hand over hers.

'I doubt very much that you would make that same mistake.'

Their eyes held for a moment. Gudrun felt a fizzy heat rise inside her. She looked into his deep, dark eyes and began to speak.

'I know about the—'

Before she could finish, there was a loud banging at the front door.

Moving away from Kahn, Gudrun unbolted and opened the door. Standing on the doorstep was Tobias, holding a crudely wrapped bottle. Gudrun knew that Tobias had done it himself because she had received a similarly wrapped present from him on her last birthday.

Tobias thrust the bottle into Gudrun's hand.

'This is for Kahn. Courtesy of the Hammerbildt town guard.'

The words did not come easily to Tobias and they emerged half strangled by anger and nerves.

Gudrun coolly thanked Tobias for the gift and took it from him.

'Is that everything?' she asked, holding the door half closed.

'Please, I just want to talk to—'

Tobias saw Kahn emerge from the background. Kahn smiled at him. It ignited all manner of emotions within Tobias. Who was this man that could come falling into town and manage to gild himself favour?

'Yes?' Gudrun added impatiently.

Tobias looked away from Kahn and down at Gudrun.

'Nothing. I can see that you're busy.'

Tobias turned and walked away from the farmhouse door. As he heard the door click behind him he began to run. He ran from the Yorst farm into the forest. It was almost black and Tobias stumbled as he ran, splashing through the stream, his face and arms scratched raw by low branches and brambles., his lungs burning from exertion.

When he finally reached the foot of Hammer Hill, wet and sodden by sweat, dirty water and his own tears, Tobias howled.

He howled from the bottom of his soul like an animal that had been wounded and denied in a way that could never be expressed through actions or words.

It was quiet in the forest that night. No other animal could compete.



**E**VEN THOUGH the bed was warm, Kahn still felt cold.

He wasn't sure if it was because of the chill in his bones from his night spent floating in the water, the wind ripping through the town or the dread feeling he had that his pursuers would not be far behind, but the net result was the same.

He was freezing.

Trying to ignore it, Kahn's thoughts turned to the earlier meeting with the town guard.

By his estimation it had gone well. They seemed willing to accept the story he'd given them without even any real objection.

He'd expected more rigour in their questioning than they showed, but then Captain Klose did seem a special kind of incompetent.

As Kahn chuckled to himself, Gudrun began to stir. She spread her lean, white arm across the width of the bed and almost hit him in face. It finally came to rest on his chest.

Looking at her arm for a moment, Kahn finally plucked her hand away from him and moved it back towards her own chest, gently folding it so that it rested on the tip of her shoulder.

She had been upset after the incident with the local boy, looking tearful and coquettishly implored Kahn to join her by the fire. It was true that Kahn was not currently in the best shape of his life, but even in his weakened state he was not averse to trying to turn a situation towards his advantage.

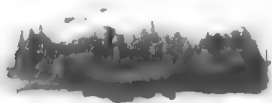
So he did.

But, as he lay back on the pillow, the warm angular body of Gudrun next to his own, he knew this whole situation was merely a pleasant diversion and that he needed to keep his mind on the task in hand.

In a few days he'd be well enough to leave Hammerbildt and head towards one of the cities in the middle of the Empire where he would be able to set himself up with the contents of the three sacks he had managed to procure.

A perfect plan, he thought to himself, wrapping the sheets tightly around him in an effort to stave off the cold.

What could possibly go wrong?



**I**T WAS THREE days after the town guard meeting when Kahn next set foot in the tavern. It was late in the evening and most of the town was inside relaxing after a hard day's work.

It had been Gudrun's suggestion to go to the tavern and he hadn't felt in the mood to disagree. He was starting to feel more than a little constrained in the farmhouse and he

couldn't remember the last time he'd had a drink.

It was as they settled in a corner table, away from the minstrel who sang those awful dirges about love and chivalry he so loathed that he caught sight of him.

Tobias was seated at the bar, alone, drinking a flagon of ale.

'Does he come in here much?' Kahn asked.

Gudrun shook her head as she sipped her ale. 'He doesn't usually drink.'

Kahn picked his drink up and got to his feet.

'Where are you going?' Gudrun asked.

'I'm being sociable.'

Kahn placed his drink next to Tobias, who was hunched over the bar from his position on his stool, and leaned against the wooden bar. Tobias was looking ahead, not acknowledging Kahn, even though he knew he was not alone.

'We've never been formally introduced.'

Tobias continued to look ahead, sipping his ale as he stared at the wall.

'I know who you are,' he said tersely.

Kahn smiled.

'Of course you do.'

Tobias turned and stared at Kahn. His eyes were red. Kahn wasn't sure if it was from the ale or from crying. It could have been either.

'Look, you may have fooled everyone in this town into thinking you're some sort of innocent hero, but not me. There's something about you.'

Kahn gripped his ale and stopped smiling.

'I don't know what you think you know, but jealousy is a poisonous and dangerous thing.'

Tobias looked at him darkly.

'Leave Gudrun out of this.'

'Who said anything about Gudrun?'

Tobias could feel rage rising behind his eyes. He desperately tried to force it back down, but couldn't. Whether it was the thought of Kahn with Gudrun, the years of repression or the drink that had loosened his usually tight self control he didn't know, but before he knew it he was on the floor and Kahn had a short sword at his throat.

'Try that again and I'll slit your throat like the ignorant pig you are.'

Before Tobias could respond he heard Gudrun screaming Kahn's name.

She grabbed him and dragged him from the tavern. By the time Tobias had got to his feet Kahn and Gudrun were gone and the rest of the tavern was looking at him in silence. Even the minstrel had stopped singing his dirges.



**H**OW DARE you bring shame on me in my home town!

Kahn was surprised at how aggressive she was being. On the walk back to her house she hadn't said a word and Kahn was fully expecting a night spent in the front room, by the fire, sleeping off Gudrun's temporarily cold shoulder. He had been here many times before with different women through the years.

But this was different.

As soon as the front door was closed, Gudrun was a different person and the quiet brooding woman had become a venomous banshee.

'There was no need for that. Tobias is harmless and you could have killed him!'

Kahn was irritated, but decided to try and charm his way out of trouble. It had worked with everyone else in Hammerbildt so far.

'Gudrun, I was doing it for you, for us. I was trying to wash away the dirt from your past!'

He tried to put his hand on Gudrun's shoulder, but she pulled away.

'Don't lie to me Kahn. I want to know everything about the gold.'

Kahn was perplexed.

'But you know everything, about the bandits, everything.'

'You haven't told me why there are three sacks of gold from the Stirland treasury in your saddle bag.'

Kahn was speechless.

'I found them when I found you, but I kept quiet, even when you lied to Old Man Klose.'

Kahn's head was spinning. He wanted the ground to open up beneath him.

Gudrun looked at him with a face like flint.

'I think the least you owe me is the truth.'

Kahn was struggling to conjure an audible human sound when the uncomfortable silence of truth was broken by the screams from outside.

Kahn and Gudrun burst out of the farmhouse and ran towards the main street. On arrival, illuminated by the dull glow of the burning street lamps, they were greeted by a sight that chilled the blood.

Beastmen.

It was chaos on the main street of Hammerbildt. The tavern had just closed and most of the evening's customers were on their way home when the attack began.

There were three of them and no one knew where they had appeared from. It had been several harvests since the town had been attacked and even then the solitary Beastman was so obviously deformed and mentally sub normal that it took three farmers and a couple of dogs just minutes to corner him behind the storage barn and skewer him with pitch forks.

These beastmen were different. Powerful in build, tall in stature and filled with wanton bloodlust.

As the three misshapen monsters began destroying all before them, some citizens ran like headless chickens, others hid in the nearest alcove, basement or bush while others still – fuelled by anger and too much ale – decided to face up to the beastmen themselves.

Tobias was one of the latter.

Grabbing a torch from one of the low street lamps, he charged the smallest of the three beastmen. He buried the torch deep into the back of its head and heard the sizzle of burning flesh and fur as he drove it home. The creature screamed and dropped its cudgel. It turned and faced Tobias, its mouth seemingly beginning at the width of its ears, two rows of sharp, razor like teeth dripping foul smelling saliva and blood.

The creature jumped, its talons slashing Tobias's arm causing him to drop the torch.

Falling to his knees, Tobias rolled onto his side and evaded the creatures follow up pounce.

Seeing that it intended to leap at him again Tobias looked around for a weapon. He found an unlikely provision.

Lying next to him in the dirt, not far from its now dead owner, was the minstrel's lute. Tobias grabbed it.

As the beastman pounced, he brought the lute up and smashed the creature square in the face.

Wood splinters and dust exploded and the wounded beastman fell to the floor, spitting blood and broken teeth.

Despite the creature falling, Tobias didn't hesitate – he grabbed the broken neck of the lute, its strings still stretched along the length of the neck. He gathered the metal strings in his hand and wrapped them around the fallen beast's throat.

He pulled and tightened his homemade ligature until he felt the beastman's death rattle. Then he let go.

His palms were cut and crimson from the strings and his arm burned from the creature's claws, but he was alive and the beast was dead.

Getting back to his feet and walking up the dirt strip that was the main street, Tobias could see that the town was clear and that the danger had subsided.

The remaining two beastmen lay dead in the middle of the street. One had been beheaded and the other lay prone, slumped against the headless torso.

The remainder of the town was out in the street cheering a new hero. Through a barrier of rising pain and swimming vision he couldn't quite make out who it was who had seemingly saved the town.

As he moved further up the street, darkness clouding in on him, he could hear the ever increasing crowd chanting, scrambling to raise their new hero above their shoulders.

He collapsed to his knees, alone in the middle of town and ignored by the screaming mob as they raised the smiling figure above their heads.

Tobias passed out with the name of Hammerbildt's saviour ringing in his ears.

'KAHN! KAHN! KAHN!'



IT WAS A little after dawn when Klose was awoken. The attack on the town had meant a late night for everyone and he had only got to bed two hours previously.

Opening the door he felt the early morning chill blow through him. Standing before him was Muller.

He looked deadly serious.

'I hope this is important, Muller. I've only just gone to sleep.'

Muller looked at him in a way that let Klose know he was not here to fool around.

'There are some people who want to speak to you, Captain Klose.'

Klose was taken aback.

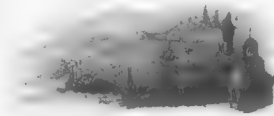
'People?'

'Three men.'

'What do they want?'

Muller was always amazed at Klose's stupidity and it took all of his resolve to not scream, 'They're here for Kahn, you idiot'.

'I think you'd better come and see for yourself,' he said instead.



THE THREE MEN sat atop their horses in the middle of the main street, blood from the beastmen still fresh on the dirt beneath their hooves. The morning air was chill and the breath from their horses' snouts condensed in the air before them.

As Klose approached them, having hurriedly dressed and left his home, he felt a deep sense of unease.

Why were these men invading the sanctity of his home town at such an ungodly hour? Had they managed some how to tame the beastmen, use them as a surprise attack and then followed up the next morning? If they had, why would they bother to announce their arrival? Klose was confused and it showed.

'I'm Captain Klose of the Hammerbildt town guard.' Klose looked up at the impassive faces of the three men. 'How can I help you?'

There was a long silence before Stein finally spoke.



'We're looking for a man. We believe he is hiding locally.'

'And what has this man supposedly done?'

'Stolen from our lord, the elector count of Stirland.'

Klose laughed.

'A likely story. You think I believe the word of three common thieves dressed in Stirland colours over the word of a hero who single-handedly repelled your vile banditry?'

Stein raised his right eyebrow in disbelief.

'Are you saying you have seen this man?'

'I am saying this town would rather be razed to the ground than give up such a man.'

Stein's mood darkened.

'Well, I would reconsider your position, captain, otherwise you may find your wish come true.'

'Reconsidering my position is not a strength of mine, sir.'

It was hopeless. Stein could see that negotiation was a waste of time and energy.

'We will return at nightfall for the brigand and woe betide you if he is not here.'

The horsemen left in a cloud of dust.

When the dust cleared Klose turned. He wanted to see how Muller felt he had handled the situation.

Muller was gone.



**I**T WAS supposed to be a quiet meeting, with only the town guard and Kahn in attendance. Five minutes before it began, the tavern was full to the rafters and most of the rest of the town were congregating in the street.

Kahn sat next to Gudrun at the front of the tavern, facing the main table that Klose, Muller and Tristan sat behind. Gudrun kept looking, but she couldn't see Tobias anywhere. It was unlike him to miss even the most mundane of town guard engagements. It was what he lived for.

The noise in the tavern was deafening and it took three loud raps on Klose's gavel to get the room to quieten down.

When the room was sufficiently silent, Klose began to speak.

'Thank you all for coming on this day of mixed emotions for Hammerbildt.'

Kahn shifted on the uncomfortable wooden bench. Gudrun looked at him with suspicion, wondering what he was scheming in his furtive mind.

'As you are no doubt aware,' Klose continued, 'last night was a night of great tragedy in this town, mixed with great heroism. For that we thank Herr Kahn.'

At the mention of his name the room burst into uncontrollable applause. It took six raps on the gavel to restore order this time.

Klose waited for absolute silence before continuing in his most stentorian tone.

'But today we face an even greater threat. Three bandits, who almost killed the saviour of Hammerbildt, have given us until dusk to hand over Herr Kahn or they will mete out their retribution on this town.'

There was silence in the room. Klose milked it before carrying on.

'So what should we do? Stand and fight, risking the blood of our people, or hand over the brave and noble warrior who – in such a short time – has brought so much to our home?'

There was a general murmur around the room before, surprising even Gudrun next to him, Kahn stood up.

'Your support for me is deeply moving and I do believe a part of me shall be forever a part of this town, but I cannot ask you to leave yourself open to attack on my behalf.'

Kahn looked around the room.

'I will leave as soon as my bag is packed.'

The crowd murmured again, but before it could gather momentum, Klose interceded.

'I expected you to say that and, in many ways, that is the correct course of action to follow. But we in Hammerbildt owe you a debt, one which we fully intend to repay. Herr Kahn, we will stand beside you and may Sigmar pity these bandits when they arrive at sundown.'

The room erupted in cheering.

As Kahn sat down Gudrun could see the smile he was being forced to hold cracking. She looked up at the head table, past the idiot grin of Klose and towards the ashen face of Muller. He had one hand on his face, the fingers resting on his forehead, and was shaking his head.

When Gudrun turned back towards Kahn he was gone. She turned towards the crowd and saw him pushing through the assembly crowd. She tried to follow him, but the crowd was too dense. She laughed at the irony of that thought and then concentrated on trying to force her way through the heaving mass of people.



**W**HEN SHE returned to the farm house Gudrun couldn't find Kahn anywhere. His bag from the bedroom was gone.

From outside, she heard a horse bray.

Gudrun ran to the barn. There was Kahn, saddling one of the horses, preparing to ride out.

'What are you doing?'

'What does it look like?' Kahn tartly replied.

'You can't go, not after what was said back at the tavern.'

Kahn looked at her with an expression that almost audibly said: grow up.

'The three Stirland troopers will come in and massacre this whole town.' He was tying the saddle to the horse as he talked to Gudrun, not even bothering to look at her. 'I don't know about you, but certain death has never been on my list of priorities.'

Gudrun was stunned. She had a lump in her throat the size of a large apple and no matter how hard she tried it remained lodged in her throat. Finally, anger and hurt dissolved it and allowed her to speak.

'But what about us?'

Finally, Kahn looked up. He smiled and then began laughing.

'Oh, us! I'm sorry, my dear, but a few nights grace and favour does not a husband make.'

Gudrun was fighting back tears.

'But I thought...'

Kahn laughed at her.

'What? That we would elope with the gold to a city somewhere and take root for the rest of our lives?'

He stroked her face with the outside of his thumb. Tears were streaking her cheeks. Kahn pitied her for her ignorance.

'But you're right on one count, it would be wrong for me to ignore the help you've given me.'

Placing his hand into the saddlebag that hung from the horses torso, Kahn withdrew a handful of small gold coins and handed them to Gudrun.

'Take these for your trouble.'

Gudrun looked down at the coins in her hand for a moment, Kahn's smiling face looming over her. She looked up and threw the coins back at Kahn's face. One of the coins caught Kahn in the eye, causing him to rear back in pain.

Clutching his eye, which was swelling and closing up beneath his gloved hand, Kahn stepped forward and slapped Gudrun across the jaw with the back of his other hand.

She fell to the floor.

Clutching his face, Kahn rode out from the barn leaving behind him the prone form of Gudrun, sprawled among the hay and filth of the barn floor.

Women, he thought to himself.



**T**OBIAS WAS sitting by the stream contemplating life after the town guard. His hands and arm were still sore from the night of the beastmen, but most of his pain was coming from inside.

He didn't ever expect to leave the town guard, let alone Hammerbildt, but the events of the last few days had caused him to do some serious thinking.

He tried to justify his decision on a rational basis. There was nothing left for him in Hammerbildt, his family had all passed away, his real value to the town had been revealed after the beastman attack.

But none of this was the real reason.  
It always came back to Gudrun.

After awakening in the doorway of the tavern early this morning – he'd assumed he'd crawled there when he was semi-conscious after seeing Kahn held aloft – Tobias went back to his family home, wrote a letter of resignation to Captain Klose and began packing his belongings.

He'd come to sit by the stream as it had long been his favourite spot in Hammerbildt. You could look down on the whole town from the slope that ran adjacent to the stream, but also, and more importantly to Tobias, you had the best view of Gudrun's farmhouse from here and he wanted to see it one last time.

As he sat there, watching the sun begin to hide behind the grey clouds that were flecking the sky, bringing the threat of rain, the last person Tobias expected to see approaching was Kahn.

He stood up as Kahn approached, his personal feelings towards the man cooler after his decision to leave. Tobias was surprised at the state of Kahn, who looked like he'd been struck in the eye.

As his rival approached, Tobias decided he would do the decent thing and strike up a conversation with the man. After all, this was the last time he would see him.

'Leaving us already, Herr Kahn?'

'And not a minute too soon,' Kahn grunted.

Tobias was surprised.

'Really?'

Kahn nodded.

'I'm sure the town and certain individuals will miss you.'

Kahn laughed.

'I doubt it. Not when those three idiots I ripped off get here.' Kahn shook his head in exasperation. 'It's going to be a bloodbath when that fool Klose tries to rally your people.'

Tobias was rendered speechless for a moment.

'You mean you stole the gold?'

Klose looked at Tobias like he was an insect.

'Of course I stole the gold. You of all people should know.' It suddenly dawned on Khan. 'Now I see. You were only suspicious of me because you thought I

was after your beloved Gudrun.' Kahn exploded in fits of laughter. 'How quaint!'

Tobias could feel his cheeks burning and a wave of rage rising within him. Kahn composed himself and continued.

'Well, you'll be pleased to hear that she's all yours, though I'm not sure she's going to be much to look at after we had our little disagreement.'

Tobias grabbed the horse's bridle.

'What have you done to her?'

Kahn tried to shift the horse, but it wouldn't budge.

'Let go of the horse.'

Tobias held tighter.

'I'm warning you...'

Tobias squeezed tighter until the horse was visibly in pain. It was then that he let the bridle go.

The horse bolted and threw Kahn from the saddle, landing on his side on the wet slope. Before he could get to his feet, Tobias was on him, punching him in the face and scrambling with him.

With Tobias writhing on top, Kahn brought his knee up between Tobias's legs. Tobias groaned and lightened his grip. It gave Kahn the opportunity to throw him off.

As Tobias lay on the floor, Kahn stood over him, ready to draw his sword. If he killed Tobias then he would get away and Klose would preside over the bloodiest day in Hammerbildt's history.

Tobias couldn't let that happen.

'Any last words, Tobias?'

Tobias coughed, still feeling the effects of Kahn's knee.

Kahn paused, his hand trained on the handle of his sword.

Tobias smiled and dived forward, catching the bemused Kahn's ankles.

The two men toppled down the sheer slope towards the town below.

They rolled together, Tobias's knee striking Kahn's mouth, drawing blood and breaking teeth instantly, while Tobias heard his own arm crack and go limp underneath him. Only the dizzying descent distracted them from the pain.

When they finally reached the bottom of the slope, backing onto Gudrun's yard, both men could barely stand. It was Kahn who got to his feet first. Stumbling and

with his face a mask of blood from his broken teeth and nose, Kahn drew his sword. He was out of breath and oblivious to the figure moving behind him.

'You surprised me, Tobias... But really you're just as predictable as that bitch Gudrun—'

Kahn didn't feel pain as the pitchfork entered his back, just a jolt and then shock as the teeth of the implement came out through his chest.

As his world began to turn black, Kahn turned and saw Gudrun standing before him. Her right cheek was a deep purple colour and, judging by the swelling, obviously fractured. She stared at him with eyes of cold hatred. Kahn couldn't resist trying to let out one last strangled laugh.

He died before it could leave his mouth.

Moving past Kahn's corpse, Gudrun walked over to the wounded Tobias. He'd certainly seen better days and his arm looked a mess, crumpled as it was beneath him, but he was alive.

Gudrun knelt down to reach him where he lay, but Tobias lifted himself as far as he could and met her half way. She put her arms around him, careful not to put too much pressure on his ruined arm.

He began to cry.

She too tried to hold her sobs back, but couldn't contain them. Tears ran down her cheeks and streaked her swollen aching face, but she didn't care.

Neither of them spoke. There was no need.



**A**S THE DAWN light broke, Gudrun stopped the cart and looked behind her.

From the top of Hammer Hill, Hammerbildt always looked beautiful at this time of the morning. Unusually, the breeze was light and it made a mockery of the heavy shawl and layers of clothing that she wore, but Gudrun didn't care.

Since the incident with Kahn she'd learnt to be cautious.

This was true of Hammerbildt too.

An innocence had been lost and a new spirit of suspicion was beginning to spread throughout the town. Never again would it be as open and accommodating to strangers, regardless of how they appeared on the surface.

This change was in part down to the influence of Muller as the new captain of the town guard. He had succeeded Klose after the older man resigned in humiliation.

Klose's last formal act as captain of the guard was to apologise to the three Stirland troopers when they returned for Kahn.

The soldiers from Stirland had identified Kahn's body before collecting what remained of the stolen gold and departing back to Stirland.

As they left, one of the soldiers commented that there was a bag of gold missing from the stash that Kahn had taken.

Gudrun had shrugged.

'There were only ever two bags. Perhaps one was lost during Kahn's escape?' Her jaw had burned as she forced out the words.

The soldier looked unconvinced, but said nothing as his two companions took possession of the remaining gold and the body of Kahn.

No one enquired about Tobias's condition or the fact that they appeared to be together again, but Gudrun had long since stopped caring.

As she continued to stare off into the distance on this strangely beautiful dawn, Tobias finally stirred from the back of the cart.

He had been sleeping. The pain from his arm was crippling first thing in the morning and the early start had been difficult for him, but he'd done it for Gudrun.

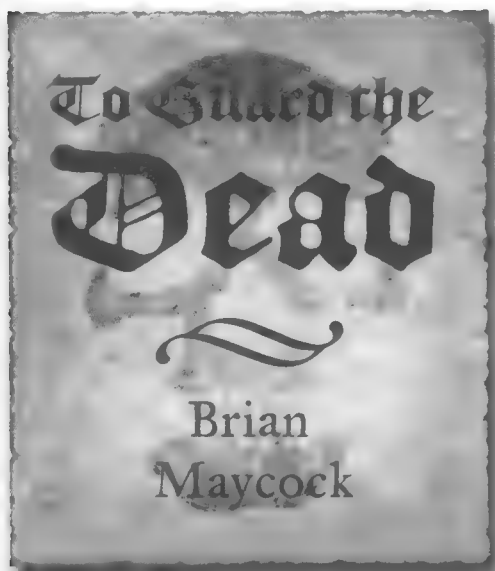
He moved beside her, put his good arm around her shoulder and together they looked out at the town of their birth one last time, the solitary bag containing their future resting by their feet.

After a few minutes they turned and set the cart on its way.

They didn't look back. ◯







**A**NGER COURSED through his body, a white-hot rage that flowed faster and faster with each step he took through the dank, cluttered merchant's shop. Past shelves crowded with glass jars, past brilliantly coloured garments that lay tangled together like nests of sleeping snakes among the detritus and silver necklaces draped over a stack of muslin sacks, until he came to the counter and the scowling merchant behind it. There, he took out the cloth in which he had wrapped the cursed thing that had forced him to come here. Blood had seeped through, but he ignored it and peeled back the corners of the cloth.

'Get out,' the merchant spluttered, seeing what was inside the cloth.

A hand, severed clean at the wrist. The fingers of the hand were clenched in a fist. He opened up the fist, lifting away one finger at a time. They were still warm and soft and gave up the treasure they guarded without a fight.

'No,' the merchant whispered.

Resting on the palm of the severed hand was a gold ring. It was exquisitely crafted, blemished only by the blood that had seeped through onto its surface. The blood of his comrade. But that did not matter now. Only one thing did. He leant forwards, feeling the anger pulsing behind his eyes. 'How much,' he asked, 'will you give me for this?'

**A** FEW MORE paces and it would be over. Brecker hesitated before the light streaming into the room from the slender opening ahead. He had dwelt in shadows for so long his eyes were filling with burning tears. He wiped them away, but as he did so images of Margarethe rushed unbidden into his mind. They were more than he could bear. A few more paces, he thought and hurried towards the light.



**'LOOK!'** Max whirled round at the sound of his brother's reedy voice and winced as his back cracked. A life spent bent double in freezing fields tending scrawny crops had left him near crippled. 'What?' he muttered though clenched teeth.

Werner was pointing high overhead. Max looked up, towards the tower that grew majestically from the western corner of the great mansion house in whose shadow they toiled. Its pinnacle reached almost to the surrounding canopy of the Great Forest and in a window near the pinnacle Max could make out the figure of a man.

'What's he doing?' Werner asked.

Max was about to say it was the call of the wind in the ancient branches when the figure swayed and toppled forwards, out of the window. Its arms and legs flapped limply at its side as it hurtled towards the earth. Then came the hideous sound of bones breaking as the man's body shattered against the frozen ground. And then he was still.



**WE ARE NOT** men of rumour borne on the fetid breath of common folk. We follow the guidance of knowledge, as once you did, as we hope you still do. However, we have our secrets to protect, and

*thus are beholden to ask why you have not answered our previous missives. We fear that this plea – that you explain your silence – will also go unanswered...*

Marcus spat in disgust. Long-winded fools! Claiming to be men of knowledge yet unable to ask directly for the truth.

He returned the copy of the letter to his pocket then reached into a pouch attached to his belt, where an infinitely more precious piece of parchment rested. Every word it held was scorched by re-reading into his soul and, as he felt once more the strength of them, a smile flickered briefly across his lined face, that was normally so stern. He would discover the truth, where the writers of the letter could not.

However unpleasant or dangerous that truth might be.

He entered a village. Standing at intervals along the rutted track that was its only road were the ramshackle homes of the village folk. In the open doorway of one a babe of not more than two or three years old dozed with its arms wrapped lovingly around the neck of a small pig. The swine's face was by far the cleaner of the two.

Marcus left them to their repose. At the end of the track was a tavern. Normally he would not venture into such low places, but he had been travelling for ten days now and desired a warm bowl of broth.

Pulling his travelling robe tighter around him to guard the precious parchment and the axe, which nestled between his shoulder blades hidden from view, Marcus passed under the tavern's sign.

Painted onto it was a beast of the forest, divided into four parts, each glistening with gore, was held aloft by two grinning, extremely fat, red-faced peasants.



**W**HAT COULD drive a man to do such a thing? Max stood in silent awe before the broken corpse. Werner was about to poke it with a stick when a shaven-headed old man emerged from the mansion. 'My lord!' he

cried and ran over to the corpse, fell on his knees and began to weep and tear at his clothes.

Max thought the man was so lost in his grief that he did not know he was being observed, so he jumped when the man addressed them in a quavering voice.

'You must leave. I must perform my final duty for my beloved master. Come, my lord,' he said, and with great tenderness took the body in his arms and began to carry it back towards the mansion.

On the threshold he turned back to face them. 'It would ease my pain a little if the villagers did not know how my master died. Will you keep this secret for me and for my master, Lord Brecker?'

'We will,' Max replied. 'And may he rest in peace.'

'Thank you,' the servant said and carried his master inside.

'We have to go to the tavern now,' Max said, 'and tell everyone what's happened.'



**H**E HAD A mighty thirst and this oaf would not delay him quenching it. Walther barged past Gunther Hass and the fool spilt his ale. Boris Voght, who caught most of it in his thick black beard, glared at Walther but wisely said nothing. Last year, Walther and his comrade Kurt had collected a debt Boris owed the blacksmith, Karl Johansen. Boris paid, preferring life to a bloody death and a ditch for a grave.

Returning to their table with the ales, Walther grinned at Kurt and said, 'Let us drink to fallen comrades!'

For twenty glorious years they had fought side-by-side as militiamen under the banner of the Emperor. It had been five years now since they had left the army, and look at them! Stuck in this village of inbreds in the middle of nowhere.

Wishing that he had a barrel of ale before him to numb his frustration, Walther sat peering sadly into his flagon and his

reverie was only broken when two familiar faces burst through the door.

Their faces redder even than the nameless peasants whose portraits graced the sign of The Quartered Wolf, Max and Werner proceeded to share every chilling detail of Lord Brecker's gruesome death.



**H**E COULD HAVE been a wraith, for all the chattering peasants cared. Drifting from the stifling heat of the tavern into the bitter night, Marcus was equally oblivious to his surroundings. This changed everything. He could no longer confront Brecker and find out why he had not answered the letters. He was beyond Marcus's reach now.

Or was he? Marcus scanned the horizon. The tower, from which Brecker had leapt, was visible. Marcus decided a dead man could still speak. The details of Brecker's injuries might point to the reasons behind his suicide.

His course of action was not so changed after all. Marcus would take himself to Brecker's mansion and interrogate him.



**T**HE GROUNDS were overgrown with brittle, frost-encrusted grass that pressed sharp against Marcus's legs as he closed on his destination. The mausoleum must once have been an impressive final resting place, but its cornerstones and arched roof were now cracked and pitted by time. Hoping that it had recently welcomed a new occupant, Marcus stole inside.

He was pleased to see a fresh candle flickering and his spirits lifted further as he stepped up to the edge of the massive stone sarcophagus which dominated the interior of the mausoleum. He noticed that

the ancient sheet of cobwebs draped over it had been torn.

Marcus freed his axe and, with it ready at his side pushed back the lid of the sarcophagus.

He gasped. So this was the truth. It was far worse than he imagined.

Marcus lifted his axe high above his head and took a step back to make the blow, which he now had to inflict. But it was a step too far. The rotten timbers below his feet collapsed under his weight, and the sarcophagus, the tomb and the dancing candle rushed from his sight as he plummeted downwards.



**I**F ONLY HE hadn't drunk so much last night.

As word of Brecker's death had spread more and more villagers had crammed into the tavern and Max had repeated his tale for every one of them who'd stood him an ale.

He was taking a deep breath to try and keep at bay a wave of nausea when he noticed the old servant making his way across the field towards them. 'What now?' he said in a sharp voice. He did not care for whom the servant mourned.

'I am sorry to interrupt your labours but I have one more favour to ask,' the servant said humbly.

'Which is?'

'My name is Josef. Now that my master is gone I serve his widow, Lady Margarethe. I am her only servant, but I am an old man and cannot protect her against the cruel, dishonest world beyond these walls. I need strong men to guard her. Would you do this for her ladyship?'

Max puffed out his cheeks.

'I can pay you well,' the servant said.

'I... er, would, but as you can see I have many crops that need gathering.'

'The land is a jealous mistress,' Werner added when he felt the servant's imploring gaze on him.

The servant's head drooped in disappointment. 'I understand,' he said. 'But if you could mention this in the village I would be most grateful.'

'I will,' Max replied. And this time he would keep his word.



**H**E WAS trapped, pinned to the ground by some heavy object that had fallen across his arms and chest. He could not make out what it was because he lay in perfect darkness, except for a shaft of dust-choked light that fell in a far corner illuminating a decayed coffin. He could make out a skull inside, he thought he saw a smile on its face, as if the skull was mocking him.

You, who came to interrogate the dead!

He slipped into a restless unconsciousness.



**M**AX WAS starting to feel better, though it had taken three ales to settle his guts.

'So you weren't tempted by the servant's offer?' Boris asked him.

'Why should I help Brecker's widow? We toil each day just to stay alive, but her husband never helped us. And he could have. He was rich enough.'

'I heard,' Gunther said, 'that Brecker's fortune was the envy of powerful men in the great city of Anaheim, and he feared they wanted to take it from him.'

'That's why he did not set foot outside of his mansion for so long,' Max added. 'Six, seven years was it? I can't remember the last time I saw him.'

'Who cares? I want to know who'll get his fortune now he's keepin' the maggots busy?' Gunther said.

'His lovely young bride.' Boris answered.

'And who'll get his lovely young bride?' Gunther bellowed.

Boris once again answered. 'A lucky man! Lady Margarethe is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.'

'Unless her beauty has faded,' Werner suggested. 'We cannot know, for Lord Brecker kept her inside the mansion since their marriage five summers ago.'

'He wouldn't let her out of his sight, that's why,' Gunther said.

'Because he was more worried about losing her than any amount of money,' Werner said. 'And who could blame him? He was already an old man when they wed.'

'True, but she'll be terrible lonely without such a devoted husband,' Max said.

'You're wrong.'

The company turned as one to look at the landlord.

'What do you know?' Boris snapped.

The landlord wiped his hands on his apron, which was so filthy he could not have been trying to clean them. 'I heard Brecker ignored his wife and spent all his time locked in his study.'

'What would make him do that?' Gunther asked.

'Books,' the landlord answered.

Gunther was not satisfied. 'What type of books?'

'I don't know,' he replied.

'You do,' Max said. 'A few here know the answer to that particular question.'

'We should not speak of such things,' the landlord chided.

Max sneered. 'Brecker's dead. Who cares if he once did work for the Colleges of Magic?'

The landlord shrugged his shoulders and went back to work. He clearly did not wish to continue this conversation.



**F**OURED BY their gossip, Walther said to Kurt, 'You know the real reason none of them want to protect her ladyship? They're cowards, scared of the cutthroats who're bound to

try their luck now Brecker's dead. I'm not scared. Come, let's go to the mansion now and speak to this Josef fellow.'

A thoughtful expression softened Kurt's battle-scarred face. 'They're scared, but not by what waits outside the mansion, but what might wait within. Who knows what Brecker brought back with him from the Colleges of Magic, if he was there? Who knows what secrets he hides.'

But Walther believed there was nothing in this world that could not be sent on its way with a broadsword and a curse. 'Cowards to a man,' he stated.

Kurt grinned, emboldened by his companion's attitude. 'So you still think we should offer our services as bodyguards?'

'I do.'

The two friends tapped their flagons together. Their course was set.

Eager to be on their way, they despatched their drinks in one gulp and were soon standing before the great wooden doors of Brecker's mansion.

Away from the inn's crackling fire, and with the cold of a mid-winter dusk snapping at his skin, Walther cursed the rags he wore. In the summer they hopped with lice, in winter the wind whistled through them.

If Kurt felt the cold, he didn't show it. His face was hard as he hammered on the door with his fist. He had to hammer a second time before a small hatch opened in the door. Bloodshot eyes peered back at them through it and a harsh voice asked, 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

'Oaf,' Walther began, his temper flaring at the man's impudence, but Kurt spoke over him.

'My name is Kurt Halder, and this is my comrade, Walther Balg. Once we were soldiers in the service of our glorious Emperor and now we offer our services as protectors of the lady of this house.'

'I welcome you,' the man answered, without hesitation. 'You will patrol the grounds of the mansion against any brigands who might approach it. If you prove worthy of this task, then we will discuss a suitable wage. Is this acceptable?'

'It is,' Walther said and the hatch was snapped shut.

He looked along the face of the mansion, each stone slab forming it taller than a man, and the mighty tower, which rose into the sky, and exclaimed, 'Magnificent!'



**T**HEIR FIRST acts in their new position were to build a roaring fire under the trees of the forest and trap and cook a hare. With their bellies lined, Kurt lit his pipe, while Walther stretched out on the ground.

Even the stars above them seemed brighter and more plentiful than those which shone down on the common roofs of the village. Walther tried to stifle a yawn. Although it had not been his intention to fall asleep, as it had never been during the nights while he was meant to be on sentry duty in his army days, the night was soon filled with the sound of his snoring.

He woke to the sound of birds chattering and Kurt relieving himself noisily against a nearby tree.

Although he could see the beauty in the steam that rose in a cloud above his friend before mingling with the thick early morning mist, Walther was less enamoured of the cold. Shivering, he made his way over to the mansion, hoping to find some shelter near its walls.

There were a number of narrow murder holes cut into the stone. Standing on tiptoe, Walther peered into one and caught a glance of the high panelled walls inside, painted skilfully with scenes of huntsmen in a forest and a grand marble staircase that spiralled up and out of sight. Did they lead to a great banqueting hall draped with tapestries recalling mighty battles of yore? Or beds in which a man could sleep undisturbed for days before waking, not to frost on his nose, but to the aroma of suckling pig roasting on a nearby fire?

Walther sighed deeply.



A heartbeat later his hand moved to the hilt of his sword. He concentrated hard.

There it was again: the sound of fallen leaves trodden underfoot.

'Kurt,' he hissed.

'What?'

'We have company.'



**I**NTRUDERS. Two men. Kurt knew them from the tavern and saw they had exchanged their flagons for long swords. They did not yet realise they had been seen.

A third and a fourth man came into view. Kurt swore under his breath. It was Max and Werner. Max held a short curved sword. Werner carried an axe in one hand, a long-handled hammer in the other. Close on their heels came Boris, brandishing the jagged edge of a broken wine bottle. They were probably emboldened by ale and their own boasts; they had come to plunder the mansion.

Kurt had seen enough. He reached for his knife and hurled it at Boris. It flew through the air and struck Boris in the throat. He tried to grasp the blade's handle, but the life was rushing from his body and all he could do was paw at it pathetically before collapsing to the ground.

His companions watched him fall, open jawed and then charged at Kurt and Walther. Max was quickest and he swung at Kurt with his blade. Kurt sidestepped it easily and hit Max in the chest with the hilt of his sword. He collapsed onto his backside and Kurt was left facing Werner.

Kurt moved to stab Werner in the face with the point of his sword. Werner reacted instinctively, crossing axe and hammer to defend against the strike, but Kurt had already pulled his sword arm back and fallen onto one knee. He forced his sword up through Werner's exposed gut and into his torso. Werner threw back his head, screamed silently and slumped forward.

With one hand Kurt withdrew his sword, with the other he pushed Werner's unresisting form over onto its back, then regained his feet. To his left, Walther stood over the first two intruders. Such was the savagery of the killing blows Walther had inflicted that both had almost been decapitated.

Satisfied, Kurt dragged Max to his feet. 'Scurry back to the tavern, you dogs, and tell them what happens to would-be thieves round these parts,' he shouted.

Max fled.

They searched the grounds of the mansion for signs of further trouble, but Kurt was confident they would have no more problems from the villagers. He suspected other thieves would come in time, vicious, expert killers, not so easily repelled.

With his comrade by his side, they would face that danger when it came. Now it was time to concentrate on other matters. He waited until the pale sun was high in the sky before approaching the doors of the mansion.

Josef appeared without delay when Kurt knocked. The servant seemed pleased. 'I witnessed your bravery against those cursed intruders,' he said, 'and think it worthy of this.' He pushed a purse of gold out of the hatch, into Kurt's grateful hands. While Kurt was still mumbling his thanks the hatch closed.

Kurt's grin threatened to split his face as he tucked the purse safely into his jacket. 'To keep it safe,' he told Walther. 'We'll divide it equally later. Agreed?'

Walther nodded.

'A few more purses like this,' Kurt went on, 'and we can finally get away from here.' He slapped Walther on the back. 'At last our luck has turned!'



**T**HE DAY and most of the following night passed without incident, but the biting cold was getting to Walther. 'A bandit or two to kill would at least

keep us warm,' he grumbled, glancing up at the moons, riding high in the night sky.

'I'll wager it's nice and warm inside the mansion,' Kurt commented.

At mention of this other world, so close, yet denied to him, Walther's mood blackened even further.

'I am tempted,' Kurt went on, 'to warm my bones and while we're there we may learn a few of the secrets the mansion holds.'

Walther felt the chill being driven out his bones at the mere prospect of entering the mansion. 'I shall join you,' he said, observing the first reddening of the horizon. 'We must hurry. This expedition needs the cover of darkness.'

'And a way in.' Kurt pointed a dagger upwards.

Walther craned his neck and saw the balcony above. He frowned. It was the height of six men. 'Simple,' Kurt said and produced a second dagger. He jammed the first in a gap between the stone blocks and, using this as a foothold, stuck the second dagger in a higher gap.

Climbing in this manner, he was on the balcony in no time and dropped the blades over the edge for Walther to follow.

The room in which they found themselves was empty except for a bed frame.

'Useless,' Kurt whispered and crept out of the room. Walther started to follow but hesitated as Kurt slipped out of sight, his attention caught by portraits lining the corridor's walls. He could see a dozen, each with the same subject: a young woman, whose image transfixed Walther.

She was slim, with the palest of skin, and the long blond hair that fell to her waist seemed to flow into the fabric of her dress.

She was perfect.



**W**HAT TREASURES might a wizard hide? Kurt peered inside another room. He saw clay pots

and stacks of leather-bound books, nothing worth stealing.

In the next room along he saw scorch marks covering wide swathes of the walls and ceiling and, piled in a corner, ashes in which he could make out the remains of parchment.

Kurt sighed. He would look behind one more door then call it a night. Crossing to the room opposite he entered. He immediately wished that he had left this threshold uncrossed.

It began at the manacles fixed into the stone wall, then fanned out across every surface; a solid layer at first which broke into patches and then into scattered, dark points the farther his horrified gaze travelled from the manacles.

Dried blood.

Spilt in a frenzy, staining every surface it had touched.

Kurt wondered how many had died here, how slowly the life had been ripped from their flailing bodies.

Praying he would never find out, Kurt, shaking, retraced his steps. Reaching Walther, he motioned that it was time to leave. Was it some magical rite carried out by Lord Brecker? Whatever the case, he was glad the old man was dead.



**W**ALTHER WAS too preoccupied with his own thoughts to ask Kurt what he had seen and was relieved not to be quizzed by his companion about what he had been doing. And when Kurt asked Walther if he minded taking guard while he slept, Walther was only too pleased to say no.

Kurt was soon curled on the ground next to the fire and snoring worse than a pack of dogs. Confident he would not wake for a while, Walther returned to the narrow window and pressed his face against it.

He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. Moving slowly down the corridor towards him was the lady in the portrait. He could make out only the contours of her face

beneath the black veil, but still Walther knew it was her.

The Lady Margarethe, her head bowed such was the weight of her grief. Walther was a tough old campaigner, not usually prone to emotional outbursts, but he felt his heart breaking to see this beautiful woman so sad.

But worse than this was the sight of Josef by her side. He walked closer than a servant should, once even touching her arm.

Walther, his face burning, could only watch as they passed him by. He remained perched against the window long after they had gone and the sun was climbing in the sky, hoping desperately to catch another glimpse. But of the lady there was no sign.

Walther trudged back to the slumbering Kurt and stood over him. Forgive me old friend, he thought and headed towards the village.



**K**URT WOKE with the mid-day sun on his face. Feeling rested he rolled over. Walther was sat beside him, looking sheepish. 'What have you done?' he shrieked.

Walther had transformed. His cheeks were ruddy red where they'd been scrubbed clean. His ragged clothes had been replaced by shining green pantaloons, tunic, and a pure white shirt. And his hair that had been matted with years of filth now flowed over his shoulders.

'Walther?' Kurt asked.

Walther stared at his reflection in his new leather boots. 'It's like this...' he began.

It came from the mausoleum: a hoarse cry for help.

'Explain later,' Kurt snapped as they hurried towards the tomb. As he entered cold sweat trickled down the back of his neck. What if the cry had come from

within the sarcophagus that lay before him? But as his eyes adjusted to the gloom he saw a more likely source.

A hole opened up like a gaping wound in the floor. At the bottom they saw a man lying on the stone floor of what appeared to be an older burial chamber beneath. A massive length of timber lay across the man's torso.

Walther peered over Kurt's shoulder. 'Who is he?'

'How should I know?' Kurt answered.

'If he's dead, we don't have to go down there, right?'

The man's eyes flickered.

'Dammit!'

Ignoring Walther, Kurt leapt down into the chamber. Lesser men would have required horse and rope to drag away the timber, but Kurt hefted it to one side with ease. Now free, the stranger tried to speak but his face contorted with pain.

'Take your time,' Kurt said.

'There is no time,' the stranger insisted in a weak voice. He placed his hand inside a bag and grasped a parchment. Kurt saw it and flinched.

He had seen such a script before, and the symbol that was stamped on it. This man was a witch hunter.

He seemed to draw strength from the parchment because when he spoke again it was with a steady voice. 'My name is Markus. I saw Brecker's body in the sarcophagus. It has been drained of blood. There is only one creature that would do such a thing. The vampire. I suspect Lady Brecker is responsible, for in its female form the vampire can blind a man to the danger he is in until it is too late. I thought as I drifted in and out of wakefulness that I would die here and she would be left free to kill again. Until I heard voices raised in anger nearby and cried out. And here you are.' The witch hunter grasped Kurt's forearm. 'I was sent here by my order to investigate Brecker. He had ceased contact with his associates in Altdorf. They were concerned for him. For my part I was suspicious. It appears my suspicions rested on the wrong person.'

His fingers felt like iron as they closed over Kurt's skin. 'We will leave together and raise an army from the honest men of the village, then return here and destroy Lady Brecker and all who serve her. For those who serve the darkness are corrupted also by it and must be cleansed by fire.'

Kurt felt panic spiralling through his guts. He'd not known Lady Brecker was a fiend. But Kurt knew this zealot would not care. If he found out that he and Walther were in her employ and had killed several men to protect her, the witch hunter would listen only to Kurt's screams as the pyre stripped the flesh from his bones.

He could not let that happen.

Kurt tore his arm free and climbed from the cellar.

Walther remained rooted to the spot, with the dazed expression of a soldier who had lived through the carnage of battle for the first time. Kurt cursed, grabbed him, and dragged him out by his collar.

Markus cried out after them. 'Wait, do not be afraid! We have holy work to do. Please, help me from this pit before the filthy creature puts an end to me. We can gather the villagers to do away with her.' But Kurt and Walther had gone.

Markus slowly got to his feet, his mind racing. Why had they run off? And what were they doing in the mansion grounds? Were these men in the vampires thrall as well? Things were worse than he realised.



**W**E NEED to get a long way away from this village,' Kurt gasped as he ran. 'Thank the Emperor we've got our money.' He tapped his jacket, where he believed the purse was.

Walther watched as Kurt's hunt through his pockets for the purse grew increasingly frantic. 'I'm sorry,' he said quietly.

Kurt froze, comprehension dawning on his face. 'What have you done with the money?' he asked.

Walther wiped one of his new sleeves across his nose. 'I was going to ask for her hand,' he said. 'I was going to be master of all I surveyed, a noble lord. But now my dream has been stolen from me, for she is a hideous monster!'

'What have you done with the money?' Kurt asked again, his voice low.

Walther swallowed. 'For my marriage proposal to succeed I had to present myself as a gentleman. So I took the money from you while you slept, went to the merchants in the village and purchased new clothes, and this.'

He took out a gold ring. Kurt looked at it without a flicker of emotion on his face.

'I was going to pay you back,' Walther pleaded, 'once I had unlocked her heart with this ring. You must understand!'

Kurt felt anger rising inside him.

'Give me the ring, you treacherous worm.'

'No,' Walther protested.

'I am going to take it back and the merchant will give me my money.'

'No.'

'You have no choice,' Kurt told him.

'I bought this ring for Margarethe. She has been taken from me, but no one will take her ring.' Kurt could see the light of madness in Walther's eyes. The cursed bloodsucker had bewitched him. But Kurt did not care. His anger was cold and hard as a steel blade.

'Give me the ring,' he said.

'No!' Walther cried. 'The only way you will get this ring is to take it from my dead hand.'

'So be it,' Kurt said, his sword a blur as it cut through the air and bit through skin, muscle and bone in one expert motion.



**A**IGHTEOUSNESS, I am your vessel. Judgement, your servant.' Marcus dragged himself out of the cellar and stumbled away from the mansion.

The short journey that followed was the hardest thing he had ever done. The pain of each step was exquisite torture. And he welcomed it as a blessing.

When at last he reached the tavern there was no more pain, and his voice was strong when he cried out to the shocked peasants gathered inside: 'There is evil in this land! A vampire dwells in yonder mansion. I have seen her evil works! She is protected by two brigands and I ask all you Sigmar fearing men to help me kill them.'

A hush fell over the patrons. Everyone knew who the two men were: Walther and Kurt, who had murdered Boris and Werner. Now was the time to pay them back and plunder the house. It was probably packed with precious things!

One of the peasants stepped forward. It was Max, still smarting from the beating he had received from Kurt.

'I am Max Karlin. I will fight for you.'

'And I,' another man called out.

'And I.'

A chorus of voices filled the tavern.

Marcus raised his axe. 'To the mansion!' he cried. 'Together we will rid the world of this murdering beast and her depraved helpers.'

Through the village they raced, men stopping at their homes to pick up weapons, their number swelling as news spread of the mob's purpose. By the time the mansion's walls came into sight, Marcus could barely hear his own voice above the mounting tumult.

'Show no mercy!' he ordered as they swarmed up to the door, others smashing the windows, clambering though to rampage in the house, stealing and baying for blood, hurling rocks and screaming obscenities. Markus skirted around the house into a courtyard. He saw a veiled woman and a shaven-headed man slip into an outbuilding.

'The vampire is here,' he roared, loud enough for all to hear and hurried towards them. Other villagers, their blood up, gathered around him, ready to surround the building and trap the two inside.

Markus had almost reached the front gate when they crashed open as a carriage, pulled by two gigantic black horses, burst

out. It rushed towards him. He tried to leap out of its path, but he was too slow. He screamed in agony as his legs were crushed beneath the wheels. Left in its wake he could only watch helplessly as the carriage rushed on, the terrified mob scattering before it.

'You will not escape,' he called after it, but his words felt bitter and foul as bile in his mouth.



**T**HE MONEY was enough to take him far away from the village from and Walther, the man he had once called comrade, and the man he had left dying in a pool of his own blood. Soon they would be nothing but memories.

Kurt emerged from the merchant's on to the muddy street. He walked briskly down the deserted main street and passed out of the village. As he got further away, his mood lifted. At last, he was on the move again, with a pocket of coins and no one to worry about except himself. He rounded a bend in the road and was confronted by a hideous vision.

Walther.

But it could not be. Yet here he stood, blocking Kurt's path. His fine clothes were now stained with blood, one arm hung limp at his side, its end a glistening stump, his remaining hand clenched in a fist.

A fist that came rushing towards his face.



**H**E WAS FALLING into an abyss, as Lord Brecker had fallen. Plummeting to his death.

Kurt's head jerked upwards, his eyes opened. The abyss was gone. In its place, seated opposite Kurt in what his reeling senses realised was the interior of a coach,

was the servant, Josef, Lady Brecker, still impassive beneath her black widow's veil, and by her side...

'No,' Kurt sobbed.

Walther stared at Kurt with eyes darker than night. At the centre of the darkness, two balefires glowed.

To escape their glare Kurt would have ripped his own eyes out of their sockets, if he had been able, but he was paralysed with fear.

'Help me, Josef,' he begged.

Josef smiled. 'It pleases me to see how easily a strong man can be made helpless. Especially in the case of our friend, the witch hunter. He snapped like a twig. I wonder if he will ever discover one of his precious vampires now.' He turned to Lady Brecker. 'Is it you he sought? Do you have a taste for blood? Let us see if it marks your sweet lips.' Tenderly, slowly, he lifted the veil that covered her face.

Kurt began to shake uncontrollably.

Lady Margarethe Brecker was still beautiful, but like an oil painting, the surface of which is cracked with age. Her skin had begun to break away. Dark patches from which rose the rank scent of decaying flesh had appeared on her cheeks and forehead. And in her eyes, Kurt saw again the hateful fire trapped within orbs of utter darkness. He realised what she had become. What Walther had become.

They were the dead, resurrected.

'You see,' Josef said, 'Margarethe is no vampire.'

Kurt saw how small black flies clustered around Lady Brecker's neck where the flesh had fallen away to reveal a sliver of white bone. 'She is life desecrated,' he said.

Josef shot to his feet and struck Kurt with the back of his hand. 'She is my wife,' he screamed.



**M**Y SWEET Margarethe.'

He called her name as he ran from his study. He had been so foolish. Locking himself away with that cursed book, pouring over it in the desperate need to unlock its contents.

He had come so close to destroying himself, and he would have, save for a flash of clarity when he saw the evil that he was being led towards. He had burnt the evil book and freed himself.

He entered the garden, looking for his beloved but too often neglected Margarethe. Then he saw her.

Her golden hair glistened in the sunlight, her slender arms around another man, her soft lips pressing against his.

It was not till she broke the kiss that Margarethe saw him, and turned away in shame.

It was too late. 'Harlot!' he cried and struck her across the face. Rage boiled within him. He hit her again, and again. She fell hard, striking her head on a low wall. He looked down at her in horror. He would have given anything, his mansion, his fortune, and his life, to go back and change his impetuous, enraged violence. He felt his soul ebb away as she breathed her last gasp.

Her lover – Brecker did not even know his name, he was some servant, a nobody – fell to his knees. 'Have mercy, master,' he begged.

'No,' Brecker said, his eyes fixed on the corpse of his bride. 'There is no mercy anymore in this world.' He ordered the servant to carry Margarethe's body inside.

He did what he did next for love, for, despite her betrayal, he loved her still. He knew love is not something that can be discarded like an old cloak. It infects every fibre of your being.

As did the book to which he turned once more. Though its pages lay in ashes he no longer needed to read it. The fire had destroyed the book but it did not matter, it was inside him. He incanted and chanted for hours, breathing its words, and when he finished the last page he saw a mist cloud the air, saw it flow towards Margarethe's body, and



heard a sigh from her lips as she stirred again.

'My love,' he said and held out a hand to her.

Brecker knew at that moment his power was pure and good, but would others? He had overheard the superstitious nonsense the villagers had said when he first came to the mansion. And now, after so many years that he had not walked among them, what lies would they spin? And how far would those lies spread?

There were men in Altdorf who would not hesitate to cut his throat if they ever found out what he had done.

Scared now of having Margarethe stolen from him once more by righteous men, he noticed the servant, soiling himself with fear, and saw how easily his problem could be solved.

The torture he inflicted on the servant over the days that followed was not necessary for his plan to succeed, but Brecker desired it. This animal had dared touch his wife and now he would pay.

And when, finally, the last of the life drained from his body, Brecker carried it up to the highest point in his home and, ensuring there were people to witness it, hurled it from the tower. It was a simple deceit to go outside and pretend that he was the servant and the servant he.

The body having served its purpose he placed it in his tomb. Brecker did not wish to see it again, and the tomb was one place Brecker knew he would never go. Now he had mastered death itself.

But there was one final problem that gnawed at him as he strolled through the mansion with the now silent Margarethe, trying to recapture the innocence of first love.

Would thieves attack his newfound happiness? He could destroy them, of course, but that would undo his earlier deceit.

What, he wondered, was he to do?

The answer was simple.

'I need guards,' he said to Margarethe. 'Ignorant guards, idiots that only an idiot would hire.' And that is what they would see. A feeble minded servant, not

a necromancer. The world would never know what was happening, until he wanted it to. Until it was too late.



**I** ORD BRECKER! Listen well to that name, for soon men shall tremble before it as my dark empire grows.'

Brecker shivered and took a deep breath. 'An empire that I will found in some far distant place from here, for I still require time to hone my powers. Time, and servants to do my will.' Brecker looked at Walther. It was lucky that we encountered your friend here, lying in the dirt. He will help me. But do you think one servant is enough?' Brecker addressed the question to Kurt, smiling. 'I do not,' he said, and uttered a phrase in a language that Kurt did not comprehend.

It did not matter. He had to escape from here. Flee the clutches of this insane magician of death.

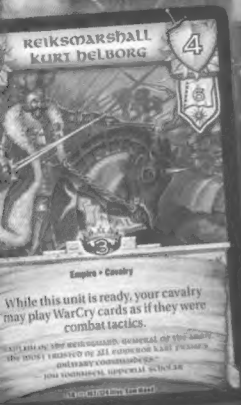
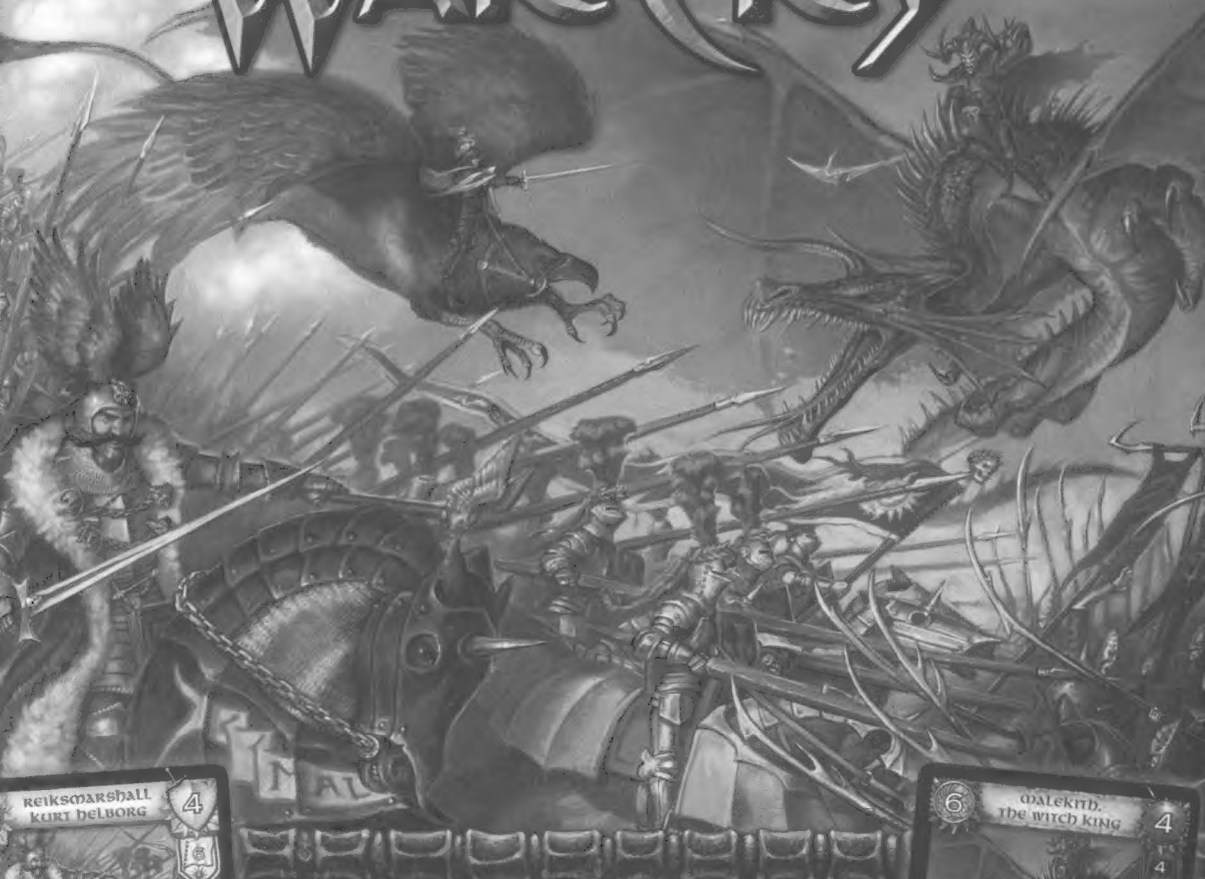
Walther stirred, animated by Brecker's words. Slowly, with jerking, halting movements, he leaned towards Kurt.

As he did so, Kurt finally managed to tear himself free from the grip of his terror and tried to draw his sword. He was too late. Walther's remaining hand grasped Kurt around the neck.

Kurt struggled, kicking out desperately, but the pressure on his neck was increasing as the cold, dead flesh of Walther's fingers pressed deeper, harder into him.

Kurt stared up into Walther's eyes, searching for some sign of the man he had fought alongside for so many years, but all he saw were those terrible fires, burning brighter now as his own vision dimmed, as the abyss formed around him, till all there was left was fire and darkness and an endless silence. ☠

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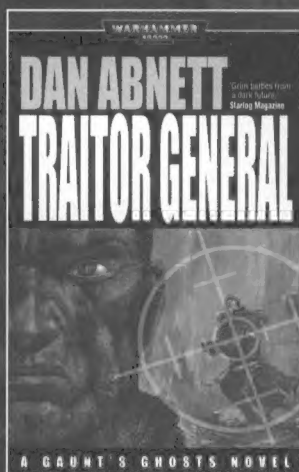
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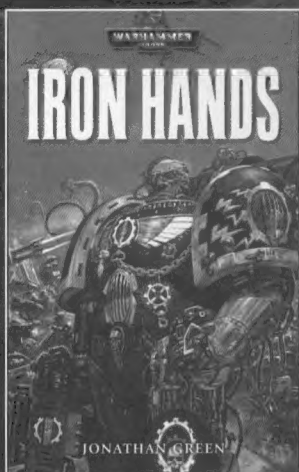
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Pulling the knife free as the second man collapsed, Gunther turned to see the coachman still standing beside his horses. Holding the butt of his coachwhip before him as an improvised weapon, the coachman seemed glued to the spot, caught between the urge to attack and the fear Gunther would dispose of him as easily as the others.

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*The novice aimed at where he thought the massive beetle machine was and opened fire. The six-legged mechanoid skipped sideways, its claw-feet flicking up sparks, and it snapped at one of the other Marines. With smooth, economical movements the insectile robot cut him in two with scythe-like talons and moved on to seek out another target, disgorging a couple of its smaller scarab-shaped brethren to set to work on the corpse.*

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'You must have overcome some of the mightiest scum on the planet to come this far!'

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*Grabbing a torch from one of the low street lamps, he charged the smallest of the three beastmen. He buried the torch deep into the back of its head and heard the sizzle of burning flesh and fur as he drove it home. The creature screamed and dropped its cudgel. It turned and faced Tobias, its mouth seemingly beginning at the width of its ears, two rows of sharp, razor like teeth dripping foul smelling saliva and blood.*

• **TO GUARD THE DEAD by Brian Maycock**

Kurt had seen enough. He reached for his knife and hurled it at Boris. It flew through the air and struck Boris in the throat. He tried to grasp the blade's handle, but the life was rushing from his body and all he could do was paw at it pathetically before collapsing to the ground.

**Tales of Fantasy & Adventure**

ISSN 1369 8648



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